

Edward Said's Influence on Academic Discourse

Frank Stewart

(Received on January 26, 2004)

Since the initial start of this project on Edward Said's influence on academic discourse, Said has passed away in New York City. In 1991, Said, was diagnosed with chronic lymphocytic leukemia, and spent subsequent years undergoing chemotherapy and experimental treatments to no avail. He died on Wednesday, September 24, 2003. He was 67.

Said was a polymath scholar and literary critic at Columbia University. He was an exemplar of American multiculturalism, at home in French, Arabic and English, but as he once put it, "a man who lived two quite separate lives." One was an American university professor, the other as a fierce critic of American and Israeli policies and an equally fierce proponent of the Palestinian cause.

Though Said was well-known for his political work, he was an eminent figure in the world of culture. He was chosen to deliver the prestigious Reith Lectures over the BBC in 1993 (which became the book, *Representations of the Intellectual*) and was president of the Modern Language Association in 1999.

"Of all American literary critics," said Richard Poirier, president of the Library of America, Dr. Said "is certainly the most influential in anything touching upon the cultural criticism of literature." Indeed, Said's primary influence in the American academy has been primarily as one of the pre-eminent introducers of contemporary European critical theory, particularly

The research for this paper was supported by a grant from the Institute of Advanced Research at Hiroshima Shudo University, 2001

as a critical supporter of Michel Foucault and opponent of Jacques Derrida, but his international prestige is based on his position as perhaps the best-known post-colonial critic. Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is the central foundational text of post colonial studies as a discipline.

Said's project has always involved a struggle for authority. In many cases, certainly since the publication of *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975) Said has been involved in recasting the forms of modernity's dominant narratives in his own uniquely creative way. In the preface to the 1985 edition of *Beginnings*, Said emphasizes a binary opposition which has continued to be central to his thought, that between filiation and affiliation. Filiation reflects a biological inevitability, the fact of son-ness, of being the product of a parent. Affiliation is instead a choice, in which something chooses to be associated with a metaphorical parent, or even sibling.

Thus *Beginnings* is concerned with the very possibility of beginning. If, as he been claimed by many contemporary critics, literature is affiliation, always controlled by that literature which has gone before, there is no beginning, only a series of false origins. But is it possible to consider any text, any thing, without asserting that it has an at least arguable 'beginning?' Said's answer is that regardless of the validity, which he admits, of various contemporary arguments about the impossibility of the original, there is always something which can be said to be the origin.

Said finds this in the intention of the author. As in his first book, his study on Conrad, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966), this is not a simple intention, but one shaped by all the forces of society; one which never makes the author into an individual independent of the multitude of forces of the author's world. Said stated that his interest is in the text as writing, rather than reading, so he emphasizes what he called 'the

intentional beginning act' which 'authorizes' the text. One of Said's primary objects of study was Freud's *Interpretation of Dream*, which he chooses expressly because it creates a narrative in opposition to what are presented as pre-existent material events. For Said, Freud's textual method represents the logic of narrative structure based on a beginning in a subject's intention. As Said notes, Freud's problem of creating a verbal representation of a dream demonstrates what seems the inevitable failure of the relationship between author's intention and the resulting text.

Beginnings shows Said the introducer. It is an early example of a work identifiably within the American critical tradition which explores many of the major European poststructuralist thinkers. As well, in the conclusion, Said makes Vico into a commentator of explicit relevance for the 1970s, a view which has continued in much contemporary criticism since. Through Vico Said explores the possibility of 'relevance' in contemporary criticism, ending with Noam Chomsky.

Orientalism might be seen as a major shift for Said, a venture away from the purely literary but, as the comments at the end of *Beginnings* show, the social context has always been central to Said's concerns. In *Orientalism* Said examines a number of European representations of the Middle East and shows how concepts of orientalism shaped what purported to be scientific objective observations. Said argues that these did not represent reality but rather were representations which reflected real conditions. He looks at orientalism as an economy controlled by a series of values. Thus many of the elements associated with orientalism are 'standard commodities.' For example, the assumed greater emphasis on sexuality in 'oriental' cultures meant that text had to exhibit such sexuality in order to be valued as oriental. Said shows that the attacks on such sexuality and the yearning for it were but swings of the same pendulum.

Orientalism is an example of what has come to be called 'colonial critique.' Some, including Said, have called it 'post-colonial criticism,' but it might be contrasted with the latter in terms of its object of study. Colonial critique considers the set of problems provided by imperialist views of the colonies. Post-colonial criticism instead examines the products of the post-colonial societies, usually texts by authors such as Ngugi or Lamming, who perceive themselves in direct opposition to colonialism.

Said's later work followed two apparently disparate but philosophically closely related paths. In one, best seen at length in the collection of essays titled *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983), Said became a general commentator on the need for a criticism which responds to society. In a discussion at a symposium in 1985 in which Gerald Graff raised serious questions about the value of French theory, Graff went on to suggest that Said was one of the more important examples of Anglo-American social criticism. Appropriately, *Beginnings* was the winner of the first Lionel Trilling Memorial Award.

A word such as 'truth' might seem out of place in a poststructural age but it suited Said. His concern that authors be aware of their own positions, had, however, never led to an intense self-reflexivity on his part. While always quick to assert his identity as a Palestinian he seldom considered his gender or his position within the academic establishment. Said's various public statements took an almost Arnoldian view of the function of criticism but never with Arnoldian disinterestedness. While he may not have claimed to be neutral, he seemed to believe his observations had a truth well beyond that controlled by his interested subjectivity.

All of those ideas might be seen in connection with those early comments on Conrad and intention. In *Orientalism* Said praised Foucault but also emphasized his rejection of Foucault's view of the author as serving only a

discursive function. For Said the author must be an always active and responsible subject in the text. Thus the critic must not just present a dissemination, as in Said's version of Derrida, but an assessment of what is — the text as a manifestation of the world.

Said's influence as a literary critic continued through the lasting presence of *Beginnings*. His importance as a spokesman for Palestinian cause may seem in the future to have been only a moment in a political development but it will have been a moment of historical importance. However, his most discussed work, *Orientalism*, might come to have much less influence than expected. Post-colonial criticism has rapidly gone beyond colonial critique, from criticism of the imperial self's view of the other to exploration of the other as self. Said's comments on post-colonial writers had been brief, almost always limited by Said's own intention, as in the following: 'I don't want to over-interpret what Rushdie means, nor do I want to put ideas in his prose that he may not have intended.' Said offered few practical suggestion about how the oppositional critic can function in support of a text rather than in opposition to it.

Said's memoir *Out of Place* (1999), speaks with moving eloquence to the homelessness of the Palestinian exile, watching the destruction of his country from afar. Yet it is hard to think of any individual more *at home* with the world's dispossessed or so at ease with cultures of all the world's peoples.

The two realities are of course deeply related. As the constantly acknowledged, Said's personal history shaped his cultural analyses as much as it did his political beliefs. He says of his childhood: "I was educated entirely in British colonial schools in Palestine and Egypt, where all study focused on the history of British society, literature and values... it is important to understand the tremendous spiritual wound felt to be of a lower

grade, perhaps even congenitally inferior and something of which to be ashamed.” These wounds of course, led to Said’s brilliant critique of eurocentrism — the idea that Europe’s is the only valid (or indeed the only) culture — *Orientalism*, which since its publication (it continues to sell) has been translated into twenty languages.

Said’s impact on English literature departments in Britain and the U. S. has been monumental, contributing, as we mentioned, not only to the development of postcolonial studies, but generating an extensive body of critical work in its wake. While some of these discuss orientalism in purely cultural terms — as a set of ideas or attitudes separable from particular historical and social forces — Said was always clear that “orientalism is associated with imperialism... it is a style of knowledge that goes hand in hand with, or is manufactured or produced out of, the actual control or domination of real geographical territory and people.”

Said saw literature and fine art first and foremost as products of history. He spoke of his debt to the English Marxists E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams who replaced bourgeois history — that of the rulers and the victors — with history from below, and restored “to individual works of literature and art the lived experience of losers in the social contest.” Said cut through the concept that art is or should be “above” politics and illustrated the Marxist idea that the ruling ideas of any society are those of the ruling class, whether reflected in French novels of the 19th century or contemporary American universities. Said was in fact not a Marxist, self-proclaimed or otherwise. He did not identify himself as a socialist either or give class conflict and struggle priority in his work.

Importantly, Said saw culture not simply as a vehicle for ruling class ideology, but as a political battleground. His *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) turns to decolonization and the tremendous blossoming of culture that

accompanied it, as Arabs, Asians and Africans threw off their colonial shackles. This work reflects his enduring interest in, and commitment to, resistance, which is anchored in his personal history, particularly his deep affiliation with the Palestinian movement after 1967, and his involvement in the government against the Vietnam War. Vietnam discredited the myth of academic neutrality: "No longer was it taken for granted that political scientists or sociologists were sage-like theoreticians or impartial researchers; many of them were discovered to be working, sometimes secretly and sometimes openly, on such topics as counterinsurgency and 'lethal research' for the State Department, the CIA or the Pentagon."

More broadly, Said saw himself as part of the vast dislocation of people in the wake of colonialism and war, and he allied himself with Third World communities in New York City from the time he moved there as a professor at Columbia University in 1963. While recognizing and challenging ruling-class ideas as they emerge in literature, he never wrote off anything, and he also saw in culture a space where dominant ideas could be challenged and exposed, and alternatives opened up.

Said's particular genius (and by inference, his influence) was his ability to situate art and culture historically while also reading it on its own terms, what he referred to as "reading the work and its worldly situation." He saw each novel, short story or poem as an individual work, a product of a distinctive individual with particular influences and experiences, and his sensitive readings attended to their precise aesthetic and emotional impact. But his critical brilliance certainly is no more on better display than in his conception of "contrapuntal criticism" which he expounds upon in *Culture and Imperialism*.

Said explains his term, which is the adjective formed from counterpoint, in this way: "In the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes

play off against one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized play.” Of course, the *counter* in *counterpoint* is a term of opposition, and in the musical technique of counterpoint, such phrasings as “note against note” occur; Said argues that “in the same way” counter-imperial themes may be read against the thus far from predominant interpretations of many great works of Western culture. Nonetheless, the direction of meaning here seems to me quite different from adversarial opposition. As Said argues, “My principal aim is not to separate but to connect,” his reason being precisely that “culture forms are hybrid, mixed, impure.”

In a 1993 interview, during which he looks back from the 90s on *Orientalism*, Said recounts how he came to contrapuntal criticism. In a self-interpretation that not all readers would agree with, he explains that in *Orientalism*, “the heroes are basically the novelists” — Gustave Flaubert notably. But, he points out, “there’s an ambivalence,” because “you could be an imperialist and an orientalist and also a great writer.” He goes on, “That’s really what I’m interested in, the coexistence of these two things.” His interest makes him ask, “what does one do in the face of that?” He sees the main traditions of literary study as having worked “to separate... completely” the great writing from bad politics. In contrast — or is it opposition? — to these traditions, contrapuntal criticism brings the writings and politics together. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said went to great lengths to differentiate his position from what he calls the “politics of blame,” in which a past writer is condemned for having participated in the evils of slavery, imperialism, and so forth. Instead, he argues, one needs “many voices” — as in musical polyphony — to “produce a history.” British novelists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Jane Austen, Joseph

Conrad, and Rudyard Kipling, were writers whom he loved and admired. This ambivalence, and the commitment it entailed to developed critical resources to honor the love, not simply to castigate the politics, set a distance between Said and much of the work in colonial discourse theory that *Orientalism* inspired.

The death of this great cultural critic is an immense loss to the world, but he will never be silenced, because he leaves behind a vast body of writing that is his gift to humanity. At the end of an essay in *Reflections on Exile* (2003), one which reflects aptly, on the association in music and literature between life and sound, and death and silence, Said paints a picture of the critical intellectual.

Whose vocation is to speak the truth to power, to reject the official discourse of orthodoxy and authority, and to exist through irony and skepticism, mixed in with the languages of the media, government and dissent, trying to articulate the silent testimony of lived suffering and stifled experience. There is no sound, no articulation that is adequate to what injustices and power inflict on the poor, the disadvantaged and the disinherited. But there are approximations to it.

In the work that succeeded in this goal, and in the countless people across the globe inspired by him to continue the struggle, Edward Said lives on.