



Edward Said and the Cultural Intellectual at Century's End

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I

Edward Said, who died in New York on 24 September 2003, at the age of sixty-seven, was one of the most distinguished cultural critics and public intellectuals of the late twentieth century. His work had an incisive impact on contemporary scholarship in many disciplines, helped radically to extend and to enliven the field of literary studies and scored a mark on some of the important public debates of our times. As a cultural theorist, Said managed to reach a breadth of readership few of his European or American peers could match. His books and articles were read and debated not just in the postgraduate classrooms of American and European universities but also by interested, educated publics across the globe. The remarkable degree of interest he commanded can be explained in part at least by the fact that his work combined a roving, restless, transdisciplinary erudition and a high level of conceptual or theoretical scruple with an exceptionally lucid and eloquent style. But that interest seemed to stem, above all, from the fact that Said's sense of the intellectual vocation was guided by the simple but compelling principle that the critic must first and foremost be answerable to what he called 'the gravity of history' – must be willing, in other words, to bring the exercise of critical judgement to bear on the serious social, political and moral crises of the times. Said had no patience with those who wished to quarantine literature or criticism off from the world, but he also maintained across his career that one of the recurrent dangers with engaged modes of criticism of whatever sort – new historicist, deconstructionist, Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, postmodernist – was that they had an inherent tendency to become more concerned with

their own autotelic self-reproduction than with the worldly problems that had originally called them into existence. When this happened, theory or criticism became once more unmoored from the world to become a new convoluted and self-regarding scholasticism, and whatever radicalism it might once have possessed diminished into a merely rhetorical or noisy dissidence that simulated oppositionality while leaving everything in fact cosily intact.

There is no single cultural theorist anywhere in the English-speaking world today who could take up the role that Said performed with such dash and energy and passionate commitment over the past several decades. His passing in that sense has left a serious void; it marks a watershed in the development of contemporary cultural theory, especially in the whole field of postcolonial studies to which he was – though quite uncomfortably – a foundational figure. Moreover, the global political landscape now opening in the early years of the twenty-first century already looks decidedly different from that which obtained when Said's most defining works were published, and with this new order of things comes new crises, new challenges, new demands on the intellectual. Hence for those who admired Edward Said, or the kinds of intellectual work with which he is associated, or the causes that he championed, this has to be a time for extended reassessment and for a circumspect looking to the future. Said has left behind a career of very considerable achievement, an extensive body of work and a certain example of the cultural critic or public intellectual that will continue to inspire. But, as with any distinguished intellectual of his stature, his achievements are also marked by areas of tension, ambivalence and contradiction, and in the rapidly shifting slipstream of the present both the achievements and the contradictions demand renewed attention. This is an extended task well beyond anything that can be attempted here, but in the space available I want to essay a few tentative and very preliminary thoughts to that end.

II

Edward Said was himself one of the most eminent representatives of an extensive new configuration of scholars of international stature who hail from the former colonies of the modern European overseas empires, an intellectual formation that he celebrates with some élan in the third chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). For Said, this body of writers – which includes novelists, poets, historians, cultural critics, activist journalists, scholars and public intellectuals – must be seen in terms of a collective

'voyage in' that was now, he contended, decisively transforming the settled ways in which the world had been understood and imagined ever since the age of empire. Shaped by the anti-imperial struggles of the twentieth century and by the emergence of the troubled, often oppressive new nation-states out of that decolonizing process, the enormous achievement of the corpus of imaginative writing and intellectual scholarship produced by these writers from across the colonial world was, Said claimed, that it had collectively effected an 'extraordinary, almost Copernican change' in the long-established Western perception of itself and of its relationship to the non-Western world.¹

As Said described it, this transformation was sufficiently seismic in scope and substance to merit comparison with two earlier moments of global intellectual-cultural transformation: the rediscovery of Greece during the humanistic period of the European Renaissance and the 'Oriental Renaissance' that extended from the eighteenth to the mid nineteenth century. While these earlier moments had constituted splendid seasons of Western intellectual ambition and self-assertion, they had also helped to consolidate an enormously stubborn Eurocentric episteme in which metropolitan European categories of thought, temporalization and value generally came to be constituted as universal categories within which all other cultures were thenceforth analysed. Sustained by European power during the classical age of empire, the long ascendancy of Eurocentrism was only now, Said contended, beginning to be systemically challenged and dismantled as a direct consequence of the intellectual and cultural revolutions that had prepared for and accompanied the anti-colonial struggles of the twentieth century. 'No longer,' he writes in prose of an excited tempo,

does the logos dwell exclusively, as it were, in London and Paris. No longer does history run unilaterally, as Hegel believed, from east to west, or from south to north, becoming more sophisticated and developed, less primitive and backward as it goes . . . But only recently have Westerners become aware that what they have to say about the history and the cultures of 'subordinate' peoples is challengeable by the people themselves, people who a few years back were simply incorporated, culture, land, history, and all, into the great Western empires and their disciplinary discourses.²

If Said was read with such lively attention across so many continents, one of the reasons for this, surely, was that he himself was always prepared to situate his own work within a whole wider gyre of 'Third World' cultural and intellectual struggles that were for him, however diverse they might be, also part of a collective and singular history. Edward Said, in sum, became

the global intellectual that he was partly because he did so much to articulate, to advance and to sharpen the collective self-consciousness of the intellectual 'voyage in' to which he attributed such significance. By the time of his relatively early death, he may well have been, as Stephen Howe has observed, 'the best-known Arab intellectual of his and perhaps any time'.³ In his tribute to Said, Mahmoud Darwish, the most distinguished Palestinian poet of his generation, came to a very similar conclusion when he wrote: 'Ask Palestinians to name their greatest source of pride and they will tell you immediately Edward Said. Our cultural history has known no genius equal to his, so plural yet unique. For the foreseeable future, he will remain the pioneer who brought the name of his homeland out of the political sphere into universal consciousness.'⁴

Yet although it indubitably bore the impress of the Arab world of his birth, Said's imaginative vision or world view was never confined to the Middle East; his reading and his interests ranged – erratically, idiosyncratically, waywardly – across many diverse regions and outposts of empire. By all appearances, the intellectual heroes whose works inspired him were geographically, politically, temperamentally and intellectually an exceptionally heterodox or even motley (albeit mainly male) company; when looked at more closely, however, affinities come into view. Some of the more recurrently and affectionately mentioned include C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire from the Caribbean; Eqbal Ahmad, Salman Rushdie, Gauri Viswanathan, Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies historians from the Indian subcontinent; George Antonious, Naguib Mahfouz, Ghassan Kanafani, Elias Khoury, Mahmoud Darwish and Ahdaf Soueif, scholars and writers from the Middle East; Alexander Cockburn, Seamus Deane, Brian Friel, Tom Paulin, Declan Kiberd, and the Field Day enterprise from Ireland; Basil Davidson, Walter Rodney, Nadine Gordimer, Benita Parry, Chinua Achebe, Tayib Salih and Martin Bernal, all of whom produced distinguished work on Africa. Some of these, most obviously Fanon and James, were revolutionary intellectuals of an earlier generation whom Said clearly revered as mentors and forerunners, and whose works and personal struggles shaped his understanding of anti-colonial history. Others, like Guha, Deane, Parry or Hall, were respected contemporaries – engaged historians or cultural critics from nation-states emerging from a recent colonial past – or metropolitan-born scholars such as Basil Davidson or Jean Franco who had dedicated their careers to such societies – Said was drawn, in other words, to intellectuals with a strong and independent sense of critical mission who had the capacity to empathize with the great anti-colonial struggles of modern times but who also had the courage to hold these societies and their writers to very rigorous standards. Others again,

such as Eqbal Ahmad, were close personal friends, or, like Rushdie and Soueif, fellow 'non-Westerners' whom he admired and who had attained, as he had, a controversial celebrity within the West. The contemporary literary figures he tended to mention with respect are almost invariably, like Mahfouz or Darwish or Gordimer or Toni Morrison, committed or engaged writers whose dedication to their art went hand in hand with a sustained attentiveness to 'the gravity of history' that matched his own. For many students, the Said that they will come to know in classrooms will appear in the cultural-theory anthologies alongside the likes of Northrop Frye, Paul De Man, Geoffrey Hartman, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton or Fredric Jameson. In his later career especially, however, Said situated himself within a quite different lineage and company, and though that company, like that which the late Yeats summons up in 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited', is a carefully orchestrated work of self-artifice, it is still quite indicative of what mattered to Said towards the end; it tells us much about how he perceived himself and how he wished to be seen historically.

Said, then, was distinguished by an unusual capacity to see or to make connections across these quite diverse regions of the erstwhile European empires (especially the regions of the British Empire) and across the diverse literary formations and intellectual projects stimulated into existence by the distinct colonial and postcolonial predicaments of the regions in question. For some of his critics, the connections he identified were too amateurish or non-systemic or too personalized to persuade. For Said, one suspects, the purpose of making such connections was first and foremost simply to connect. He wanted, in other words, to establish some kind of intellectual traffic between the bodies of writing and scholarship that excited him in order that the creative energies and critical lessons generated by the anti-colonial or postcolonial struggles in one region of the world might also be made available through acts of 'creative borrowing' to other sites – there to be refashioned (in the manner that he discusses in the brilliant essays 'Travelling Theory' and 'Travelling Theory Reconsidered') to new ends in the service of what, after Fanon, he referred to as a post-nationalist stage of liberation still to be achieved.

It is one of the mantras of our times that we live in an increasingly globalized world in which an accelerated mixing of heteroglot populations and cultures is now normative. Nevertheless, as Aijaz Ahmad in an acerbic critique of postcolonial studies pointed out some time ago, even today the average intellectual from Ireland or Palestine, Algeria or Nigeria, India or Vietnam, Jamaica or South Africa is far likelier to have a much more expansive and intimate knowledge of Britain or France or Germany or Spain than he or she is to be acquainted with the histories and cultures of

other ex-colonies.⁵ That this should be the case is scarcely surprising: the links between the ex-colonies and the erstwhile imperial centres survive and thrive for very understandable material reasons having to do with long-established educational and migration routes, common languages, literary cross-pollinations and so forth that were developed during the classical age of empire. But while Ahmad is absolutely correct to point out that this makes any reference to a common global 'colonial experience' utterly spurious, he is also surely too fatalistic in his apparent assumption that this condition, however intractable it may be at present, is simply an insurmountable given.

In works such as *Culture and Imperialism* an alternative sense of things is imaginatively sketched at least. The whole drive of that work – very much against the prevailing intellectual currents of its moment in many ways – is to view the modern history of imperialism and anti-imperialism as a complex, variegated whole, not as a relay of discrete national narratives or micro-histories. In that work, Said labours, self-consciously as a generalist, and not as a specialist, to identify affiliations and connections across the former colonies as expressed in the work of generations of intellectuals, writers and activists contemplating the colonial and postcolonial situations of Algeria, Africa, the West Indies, Ireland, India, South America and elsewhere. Roving peripatetically and unpredictably in that third chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* from the work of Edward Thompson to that of Frantz Fanon, from Partha Chatterjee on Nehru and Gandhi to Seamus Deane on Yeats, from C. L. R. James and George Antonius on anti-colonial revolution to Ranajit Guha and S. H. Alatas on Western conceptions of subaltern populations, Said's conception of anti-colonial intellectual politics can sometimes seem woefully arbitrary; his selection of representative heroes and works governed by no other principle of selection than his own curiosity. But while Said's survey does indeed sport a *flâneur*-like quality, there is also something splendid and salutary in its drive to stray beyond the sanctioned fields or established circuits of cultural analysis to navigate new intellectual trade routes that neither metropolitan nor anti-colonial intellectuals had charted before.

The connections that he makes across regions in that work, as in others, are undoubtedly highly improvised and individualized. Moreover, despite his undoubted reverence for the likes of Fanon or James or Guha or Mahfouz, and despite the severe and justified censure that he directs at cultural historians, such as Perry Anderson, whose surveys of the contemporary intellectual scene almost never extend beyond European and American intellectuals, Said himself very rarely devoted the same scrupulously sustained attention in his critical essays to the 'non-Westerners' he revered as he did to Europeans.

There are relatively few extended, searching essays on, say, Kanafani, Gordimer, Darwish, Guha, Fanon, James, Mahfouz, Marquez or Achebe that would match his magisterial pieces on Swift, Conrad, T. E. Lawrence, Vico, Schwab, Auerbach, Foucault or Freud. For future generations of writers and scholars, then, the challenge is not simply to follow demurely in Said's tracks, but to develop the connections he so often signposted in his works beyond the merely gestural, to overcome the regionalized intellectual confinements that are themselves one of the most stubborn legacies of empire, to develop new research agendas and new educational trade routes that might eventually create the conditions for a radical intellectual-cultural globalization that would be a genuine alternative to the 'thin' and overwhelmingly Anglophone and consumerist versions that now pass for such.

In intellectual terms, if we wanted to turn the terminology of colonialism against itself, Said was an explorer and a navigator, a kind of intellectual Vasco de Gama, rather than a long-term settler or systemic administrator. His genius was his capacity to open up routes of intellectual exploration that were more often than not left to others to develop in more systemic and sustained fashion. The generosity and verve with which he imagined and charted the 'voyage in' is, in its own right, a magnetic and compelling achievement, the full force of which has still to be determined. In Said's hands, the anti-colonial intellectuals emblematic of that 'voyage in' are perned like figures in a Yeatsian gyre; the chapter on 'Resistance and Opposition' in *Culture and Imperialism* has, for all its awkward mixture of sketchiness and *sprezzatura*, a visionary quality pregnant with a sense of still-to-be-redeemed possibility. In the current moment, when so many American and European intellectuals labour to make the whole history of Western imperialism respectable once again, and would have us believe again that Empire was simply a handmaid to the extension of the Enlightenment, Said's insistence on the achievements of all those writers and intellectuals from across the world who had struggled against the weight of this consensus to disclose the dark and destructive side of the imperial landscape seems if anything even more timely and more urgently political today than when that chapter first appeared in the 1990s.

III

Said's capacity to make connections between different regions of the old European maritime empires was by no means, however, the only source of his intellectual strength or authority. There was also the much-remarked breadth of his passions and abilities. He was for fourteen years a member of

the Palestinian National Authority and the most able and eloquent defender in the Western hemisphere of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination. Within the United States especially, his advocacy on behalf of the Palestinians and his critique of the Israeli state earned him relentless hostility both from the extraordinarily powerful and pugnacious pro-Israeli lobby and from the local establishment of Middle East 'experts' he had critiqued to such devastating effect in *Orientalism* (1978) and other works.

Above and beyond this role, Said was also an outstanding cultural mediator between the Euro-American and the Arab-Islamic worlds. When writing for audiences in the West, he critiqued the habitual mixture of licensed ignorance and racist condescension that so often characterizes the treatment of the Middle East and the Islamic world generally. The gap between the US's self-congratulatory conception of itself as the doughty champion of democracy and the actual perception of its role in the 'Third World' was something to which he insistently returned: 'For two generations the United States', he reminded his readers, 'has sided in the Middle East with tyranny and injustice. No struggle for democracy, or women's rights, or secularism and the rights of minorities has the United States officially supported.'⁶ Instead, it had (along with France, Britain, China and the Soviet Union) engaged in vast arms sales to the deeply oppressive regimes that were the main impediments to Arab democratization. When addressing the Arab world, Said was no less scathing, however, about the authoritarianism of those Arab regimes or about the collaborationist mendacity that so often took refuge behind bombastic condemnations of Israel. He also regularly condemned the Arab intellectual classes for their failure to develop a much deeper working knowledge of the United States, decrying the lack of any solid network of institutions within the Arab world devoted to the study of a country that exercised such massive influence on the region.

The critiques of the United States or of the Arab world that Said delivered in such writings were judicious and unflinching and very influential, but they were not perhaps particularly original, and there are some who feel that in these works Said sacrificed to a polemic that he might have left to others the rich theoretical talent that he had displayed in early works such as *Beginnings* (1975) or *Orientalism*. It is certainly the case that, in his immediate vocation as a scholar and cultural critic, Said was very formidably accomplished and that after the enormous success of *Orientalism* the works he devoted to the Palestinian issue and to the Western treatment of the Middle East and Islam entailed a different type of writing and opened up a whole new trajectory in his career that diverted his energies away from theoretical and philosophical interests of the earlier work. Although he continued right

across his career to write articles of considerable theoretical verve, it was not until the uncompleted *Late Style* perhaps, a book taken on against the tyranny of quickly diminishing time, that Said would fully return again to work in the theoretical and philosophical vein of those early works.

The changing trajectory (or multiple trajectories) of the career after *Orientalism* is certainly a very remarkable, even unique, one in recent times; one would be hard put to imagine a parallel case among contemporary scholars of his stature. Nevertheless, it would be too easy to say that with *Orientalism* Said amassed a huge cultural capital that he then expended on his advocacy of the Palestinians and of the Arab world more generally, though there is some truth to this. Certainly, one can clearly detect, after *Orientalism*, a curious and strangely moving homing instinct that draws Said back to the Middle East, an almost involuntary return that finds its most complex emotive expression in those essays that describe his late visits to Israel to see the Said family residence of his early youth. His lifelong fascination with Conrad is always attributed to the fact that Said saw in the Polish writer a fellow exile writing from the heart of the imperial metropolis. Conrad was, however, a Pole who made himself by a strenuous lifetime's work into an honorary Englishman. Said, in contrast, seems to have moved, with scarcely less difficulty, in the entirely opposite direction. The sense of cultivated Englishness into which he was born was and would, as the memoir *Out of Place* (1999) suggests, remain primal, but though he wore that sense of Englishness apparently quite effortlessly, Said nevertheless devoted a lifetime to shedding it in order to become eventually one of the great Arab intellectual-patriots of the age. In this sense at least, the whole trajectory of his career ran directly contrary to that of his beloved Conrad.

Still, the move way from cultural theory of the kind displayed in *Beginnings* or *Orientalism* and the increased engagement with the world of Arab politics that marked his mature middle decades cannot be explained exclusively in terms of personal history or psychology either. The tensions that motivate the awkward shuffle from 'high theorist' to activist-intellectual and back again run deeper and have also to do with Said's intellectual (as opposed to ethnic or emotional) formation and with his highly ambivalent attitude to cultural theory – an ambivalence symptomatic of the closing decades of the twentieth century generally. Despite his reputation as a 'high theorist', Said always remained openly, if awkwardly, indebted to the humanist traditions of scholarship and to the discipline of European comparativist literature in which he was trained. Intellectual heroes in this tradition included Auerbach, Adorno, and Lukács, to each of whom he paid generous homage, as indeed he did to American liberal and leftist teachers and colleagues such as Blackmur, Trilling, Jameson and others. And yet while

major works such as *Beginnings* or *Orientalism* (or the shorter works on music and opera) display a passionately felt investment in European high culture, Said's most decisive intellectual moment came when he turned his passions against these formative traditions and against the whole disciplinary structure in which he had himself been intellectually schooled.

Without his background and training in European comparative literature, he could never have written the magisterial critical survey of British, French, German and American literature and scholarship on the Arab world that is *Orientalism*. And yet one of the singular achievements of *Orientalism* was that it issued a decisive challenge not only to the professional 'political' orientalists in US and European universities and state departments, a major achievement in itself that provoked a wasps' nest of controversy, but that it also, almost as a side effect, detonated the complacent Eurocentrism of comparative literary and cultural studies. By now the critiques of *Orientalism* constitute an entire literature of their own, but the whole thrust of that work continues several decades later to be extremely fertile and productive. In the works of a varied range of intellectuals such as Enrique Dussel, Walter Dignolo, Arturo Escobar, Eduard Glissant, James Blaut, Paul Gilroy, Martin Bernal, Keith Whitlam, Abdelkhebir Khatibi, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Lloyd and many others, a concerted attempt to think beyond the normative temporal and spatial concepts that have governed established histories of modernity is now well underway. These attempts to rethink the standard Western conceptions of modernity have different intellectual pedigrees and proceed along multiple and divergent trajectories, but the enormous catalytic contribution that *Orientalism* made to this task is everywhere acknowledged.

If Said left it mainly to others to extend the theoretical agenda of *Orientalism*, while he himself went on to write works of a different order such as *The Question of Palestine* (1979), *Blaming the Victims* (1987) or *Covering Islam* (1981), this seems largely to do with the fact that Said was never able to reconcile himself to the notion that cultural theory could or should be a sufficient end in itself. Though he was not a Marxist, the Marxist preoccupation with the relationship between theory and practice clearly tormented him a great deal more than it has done many a contemporary Marxist luminary. The fact that he was simultaneously a glamorous American academic star or high theorist, living comfortably in New York, and actively involved in the Palestinian struggle, the front lines of which ran through the appallingly wretched ghettos of Gaza or the refugee camps of Lebanon, obviously whetted and aggravated this anxiety. However, his desire that theory or intellectual work should actually have some social meaning beyond the academy is indicative also of a much more pervasive

late-twentieth-century sense of academic crisis. Said's constant insistence on terms such as 'secular criticism' or 'worldliness', or indeed the obsessiveness with which he returns to the question of the intellectual, or to essays on those he considered exemplary intellectuals, are symptomatic of a desperate attempt to make theory actually matter in the world at a historical moment when – for a whole variety of reasons – the connection between the critic, the text and the world was becoming increasingly difficult to make.

For much of the twentieth century, one way for the cultural intellectual to secure such connection was by affiliation to the political party, the party itself representing the intellectual vanguard of the proletariat or the social or national movement and the intellectual playing the part of the party's theoretician, conscience and sometimes roving cultural ambassador to boot. The whole history of Soviet and Chinese communism, the stagnation of Eurocommunism, the managerialist pragmatism of the socialist democratic parties, not to mention the mainly sorry fate of the leftist vanguards in the Middle East and the 'Third World' generally, had demonstrated the shortcomings of this 'solution' to the theory-praxis dilemma, and in the late twentieth century especially, as the fortunes of the left receded across so many parts of the world, no intellectual – least of all one working as Said did between America and the Middle East – would find it easy to fit into this role as Lukács, Sartre or Althusser had done a generation earlier. With the disintegration of this historical role, certainly in the West, the next major attempt on the part of cultural intellectuals to find a new sense of purpose for their vocation was probably what has become known as the 'structuralist moment'. A retrospective construction of diverse intellectual schools that included the Russian Formalists through the Prague Circle to the French anthropologists and cultural theorists of the 1960s, structuralism attempted, valiantly, to elevate the study of culture to the status of a 'science'. While that effort can boast many achievements, its ultimate effect, however, was also to turn the cultural intellectual into some kind of academic technocrat of narrative signs and syntax without either the broad social appeal of the 'general intellectual' (such as, say, Sartre) or for that matter the status of the social sciences let alone the 'hard' sciences. With the disintegration of structuralism came the various modes of 'poststructuralism' and 'postmodernism' that refuted the 'grand narratives' of enlightenment and universal emancipation altogether, and, in so doing, compelled the intellectual either to find a new role as a 'micro-intellectual' identified with some particular cause that made no universal claims, or to the demoralized conclusion that all cultural struggles are simply a contest within a more-or-less closed system for the accumulation or aggrandisement of cultural capital.

While this account is evidently a very crude thumbnail sketch of an infinitely more complex history, it is perhaps reasonable to conclude, nonetheless, that the many valiant attempts in the second half of the twentieth century to make the humanities or cultural theory (or simply 'theory' as it became known) socially significant have tended more often than not to follow a parabola that would culminate in some form of either bullish or despairing endorsement of 'theory for theory's sake'. At the end of the nineteenth century there had been a not dissimilar crisis within the world of art itself, which had issued in the movement of 'art for art's sake', that crisis precipitated by the collapse of traditional high culture consequent to the collapse of the European *anciens régimes* and by the accelerated expansion of the capitalist cultural industries which subjected all of the arts to the regulations of the cash nexus.

If the 'art for art's sake' movement of the late nineteenth century was one symptom of a wider crisis concerning the purpose of art and culture in an increasingly capitalist world, the contemporary 'canon wars', 'culture wars', 'theory wars' and the larger dilemmas of the intellectual and the humanities described above are ultimately a later manifestation of the same ongoing historical crisis. Since the 1960s at least, academics have been writing about issues such as corporatization, commodification and consumerism as these have pertained to modern lifestyles or to mass culture, but not, one might conclude until very recently at least, to their own institutions and vocations. All the while, however, the university has been transformed in a whole host of ways that have – whatever else they have done – remodelled higher education to serve essentially the same commodification and consumerist processes.

Just some of these changes would include the elaboration of schools and universities league tables, a strategy by which the upper and middle classes can once again divest themselves of any commitment to an even semi-equably funded state education system; new modes of university funding that effectively lock the universities – especially the sciences and social sciences – into the world of state-subsidised corporate research; the development of a Hollywood-style academic 'star system' (the dialectically necessary counterpoint to the ever-increasing standardization of assembly-line-type teaching); the subordination of the university to modes of 'accountancy' that are really only ways of extending administrative interference and of subjecting education as a whole to the instrumentalist demands of the market. Our current 'post-industrial' economies are characterized by short-term contracts, flexible labour, low levels of unionization, rapid turnover, constant 're-skilling', and new modes for communicating information that emphasize above all else facility of access

(so-called 'user-friendliness') and speed. The universities, now increasingly eager to detach themselves from their traditional medieval or indeed modern structures in order to reinvent themselves on the model of the corporation, are today openly driven by the same imperatives and practices at all levels, teaching, research and administrative. Undergraduate teaching even in the major and wealthier universities is increasingly conducted by poorly paid, poorly resourced, sometimes underqualified students or by exploited staff on very short-term contracts. In the university, as in the corporate sector generally, the cult of the 'chief executive officer' reigns supreme, signifying the ascendancy of a new type of managerial ideology that in itself testifies to the wider convergence of the university sector and the neo-liberal capitalist ethos. In an age in which 'the individual's freedom to choose' is touted as the supposedly supreme value – as though 'choice' had been magically severed from economic and other resources, as though the bang could now be had without the buck – this whole system of cultural value positively encourages students to approach their education in crassly consumerist and instrumentalist terms and academics to deliver it to them as such.

While one might imagine from right-wing diatribes that the universities were chock-full of shockingly radical leftists, feminists, lesbians, libertarians and other 'enemies of Western civilization', in actual fact the academic community as a whole (its most radical 'stars' included) has accommodated these changes within its own sector with astounding passivity. Indeed, the gap between the radical language and commitments espoused by would-be dissident academics and their ongoing transformation into lower-management corporate functionaries has reached such a point that it can no longer be ignored. Hence the rash of publications in recent years on the subject of the university that attempt – very late in the day – to take the measure of this crisis.⁷

It is, I think, to this wider historico-intellectual context, and not solely to Said's complex psychology, or even to his sense of responsibility to the Palestinian people, that we must turn if we are to make any sense of the apparent *détournements* of his later career. Said was among the earliest of North American critics to demonstrate a thoroughgoing mastery of continental European high theory, and yet he was also among the very earliest to recognize the ways in which theory was so often accommodated within the academy only to become a kind of cult language of the coterie or a showy rhetoric of professional expertise that pretended to deal with political questions of the utmost importance, while in reality it served simply as another mode of in-house academic shadow-boxing. The essays in *The World, the Text and the Critic*, first published in book form in 1983,

though many of them had already appeared earlier as articles, offered a very prescient and trenchant diagnosis of this phenomenon (a theme taken up two decades later by Terry Eagleton in his *After Theory* (2003)), and they still remain among the more thoughtful and weighty ruminations on that topic.

The anxiety to which Said returns again and again in *The World, the Text and the Critic* is the degree to which theory in the humanities starts out with high ambition to be a force for emancipatory social change in the world, only somehow to degenerate into a kind of mummery in which nothing more than ritual intellectual jousting with one's intellectual opponents is at stake. The work is by no means an anti-academic or anti-intellectual rant of the sort that would emerge everywhere on the right at that time, and Said is clear that, on the whole, the injection of continental theory into the Anglophone academy has greatly invigorated the study of literature. 'Never before in the history of American literary culture', he writes in 'Reflections on American "Left" Literary Criticism', 'has there been such widespread and such serious, sometimes technical, and frequently contentious discussion of issues in literary criticism. Every critic or teacher of literature is affected by the discussion.' Nor is he alarmed, as some were, by the heterodoxy of the scene; indeed, given his temperamental aversion to orthodoxy, he welcomes it: 'It is probably true, for example, that even though many of the critical schools (among others, semiotics, hermeneutics, Marxism, deconstruction) continue to have their strict apostles, the critical atmosphere is a mixed one, with everyone more or less in touch with most of the reigning methods, schools, disciplines.'⁸ In the end, however, the dominant sentiment expressed in the essay is a deep and even scathing dismay, and Said's evaluation of the scene needs to be quoted at length to appreciate its texture and concerns:

True, there are important actual achievements to which it [the literary critical and theoretical renaissance] can point with pride. There are genuinely original, even revolutionary works of critical theory and interpretation, and these have been surrounded by a whole rhetorical armor of apology, attack, and extended programmatic elaboration . . . Nonetheless we find that a new criticism adopting a position of opposition to what is considered to be established or conservative academic scholarship takes on the function of the left wing in politics and argues *as if* for the radicalization of thought, practice, and perhaps even of society by means not so much of what it does and produces, but by means of what it says about itself and its opponents . . . Deconstruction, for example, is practised as if Western culture were being dismantled; semiotic analysis argues that its work amounts to a scientific and hence social revolution in the sciences of man. The examples can be multiplied, but I think what I am saying can be readily understood. There is

oppositional debate without real opposition. In this setting, even Marxism has often been accommodated to the wild exigencies of rhetoric while surrendering its true radical prerogatives.⁹

For all its achievements, Said is saying here, the theoretical renaissance in the humanities is actually a florid hothouse efflorescence indicative of a widening rift between the critic and society, between the intellectual and the citizen.

Both new and old critics have been content to confine themselves to the academic matter of literature, to the existing institutions for teaching and employing students of literature, and to the often ridiculous and always self-flattering notion that their debates have a supremely important bearing upon critical interests affecting humankind. In accepting these confinements the putative Left, no less than the Right, is very far from playing a genuinely political role. Indeed, what distinguishes the present situation is, on the one hand, a greater isolation than ever before in recent American cultural history of the literary critics from the major intellectual, political, moral and ethical issues of the day and, on the other hand, a rhetoric, a pose, a posture (let us at last be candid) claiming not so much to represent as *to be* the afflictions entailed by true adversarial politics . . . Considering its potential, oppositional Left criticism contributes very little to intellectual debate in the culture today. . . In the main, American literary criticism can afford to shed its partly self-imposed and socially legislated isolation, at least with reference to history and society. There is a whole world manipulated not only by so-called reasons of state but every variety of ahistorical consumerism, whose ethnocentrism and mendacity promise the impoverishment and oppression of most of the globe. What is lacking in contemporary criticism is . . . some sense of involvement in the affiliative processes that go on, whether or not we acknowledge them, all around us. But, as I have been saying over and over, these are matters to do with knowledge, not refinement.¹⁰

Though he was an early and, as these passages suggest, astute diagnostician of a wider intellectual crisis, Said, I think it must be acknowledged, never found anything like a satisfactory solution to it. Indeed, the best way to think of the later career, perhaps, is to say that what he did in fact, given his exceptionally prodigious personal energy, was to essay a whole repertoire of different 'solutions' to that crisis. In the immediate wake of *Orientalism* he deliberately abandoned theoretical 'refinement' as sufficient end in itself and wrote a whole series of books – including the tersely powerful national history, *The Question of Palestine*, and the extremely moving collective memoir of a people, *After the Last Sky* (1985) – that are exemplary of their

kind but also much more directly works of advocacy. By becoming a public intellectual of this kind, Said recovered, for himself at least, that sense of civic responsibility that he considered absolutely essential to the critic, but in so doing he breached the divide between theory and praxis only by taking on an additional role, rather than by actually transforming the fundamental role of the intellectual itself. On another level, Said also reverted to another 'quasi-archaic' role or 'solution': it was in these years that he became a member of the Palestinian National Council, in which capacity he became the intellectual theoretician, public conscience and global cultural ambassador to the Fatah party – taking up, in short, the independent-but-party-affiliated intellectual role akin to that which Sartre or Althusser had once attempted in a different context with respect to the French Communist Party.

It was no accident that in this phase he should attach himself to the Fatah mainstream and not to the smaller radical left and more secularist parties that might have seemed more congenial. Said had no 'postmodern' fetish for the margins. Indeed, the whole impetus in this phase was to use his powers as critic and intellectual to give direction to the party that reflected the mainstream of Palestinian society and that hence had the greatest capacity to steer the course of history. In time, he would find this role, too, impossible and be obliged to distance himself from Fatah, becoming once again an unattached, free-floating independent, and indeed, as such, the most vocal and unforgiving critic of what he saw as the capitulation of Arafat and the whole Fatah leadership after Oslo. A third 'solution' saw him turn self-reflexively to reconsider the role of the intellectual in modern times. In works such as *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994) he is clearly returning to questions of the relationship between knowledge and power, or the intellectual and society, which were always abiding obsessions. But he is also clearly trying, never very satisfactorily perhaps, to nose his way forward towards a greater understanding of the contemporary intellectual condition generally and to make sense of his own vexed situation and to reconcile the very different vectors of identity he had by now acquired.

Nowhere were the tensions within Said's own commitments more overtly manifest, however, than in this area. On the one hand, his work on orientalism and imperialism had sharpened a major challenge to almost all of the humanities disciplines as conventionally constituted. In concert with other relatively recent modes of critique such as Feminist or Women's Studies, Gay and Lesbian Studies, Ethnic Studies, and Cultural Studies, the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism aggravated an ongoing delegitimization of conventional bourgeois conceptions of what constituted 'culture' as variously defined by Humboldt, Arnold, Eliot, Leavis, the New Critics and

others. But, as Bill Readings has pointed out in a different context, traditional notions of what constituted 'culture' were, in any event, long since coming under attack, not from the left but, much more effectively, by the globalizing forces of transnational capitalism. Despite the arguments by radical conservatives for a 'return to basics', the whole tendency of the capital in the late twentieth century was no longer to pursue either an Arnoldian cultivation of 'best selves' or for that matter to deepen and develop national cultures. For contemporary global capital, the only solid criterion of cultural value is lifestyle, entertainment and marketability.¹¹

Paradoxically, then, the critique of Western bourgeois cultural hegemony articulated from the left (whether under the rubric of Feminism, Post-colonial Studies, Cultural Studies or whatever) has actually been directed at what might once have been a hegemonic conception of culture but which was now no longer so, something that meant that the left found itself, as often as not, assaulting empty bastilles. This misrecognition of the actual forces and stakes historically at issue has seriously dented the ability of new academic initiatives, such as Cultural Studies or Postcolonial Studies or Feminist Studies, to articulate strong alternatives to the existing neo-liberal order. The attempts, associated with Said and many others, to develop new non-Eurocentric modes of social and cultural analysis would logically seem to demand new kinds of institutions and new modes of intellectual training that the old humanities departments and the old university system could not readily accommodate. Yet where outside of these universities and these traditional departments was such work to be conducted? And in an age of dwindling state funding for the universities and an accelerating corporate interest in universities as a site for investment, where was the capital to develop new research programmes to come from, if not from the very transnational corporations that are so the very object of radical intellectual critique? In a broader historical sense, there was also the conceptual issue as to whether postcolonial studies represents essentially an attempt to radicalize the Enlightenment by extending it to include 'the peoples without a history', or, as some have contended, it in fact required a fundamental rethinking of the whole Enlightenment notion of what constituted universal emancipation. If the conventional Western conception of modernity was, as many have argued, deeply complicit with a virtually genocidal extermination of anything deemed to be the 'non-modern' or the 'anti-modern', then should one repudiate the whole conception of a singular modernity, as many contemporary intellectuals do? But if one did so, then didn't this also require as its logical corollary the abandonment of a whole host of earlier conceptions, from the Arnoldian to the Leavisite to the Marxian, of the role of the intellectual? If these universalist or avant-gardist roles were

now deemed defunct, however, how did one alternatively define the role of the intellectual? What, if anything, legitimized the intellectual to speak or act in such circumstance at all?

Confronted with this situation, Said, as I have suggested, essayed, usually quite brilliantly, a whole series of different intellectual roles, and attempted to rally his fellow intellectuals by exhortations to live up to their vocation to 'speak the truth to power'. Nevertheless, even though he himself lived these roles with extraordinary verve and exemplary heroism, the response to the wider cultural crises, exemplified by the Reith Lectures and other writings, already seemed increasingly ad hoc. Feeling quite rightly that the attempt in the Western universities to deal with the critiques of Eurocentrism under the rubric of 'multiculturalism' amounted to little more than a cosmetic exercise or to a kind of moral and intellectual *laissez-faire* of the kind he abhorred – anything goes, since what counts as 'culture' no longer matters so long as it sells sufficiently – Said tended to respond with either an almost reflex defence of the old liberal university or with denunciations of his fellow academics for their failure to live up to their vocation. There is something extremely voluntarist in this critique that comes to terms neither with the wider historical issues to do with culture, the university and late capitalism, however, nor even with Said's own complex involvement within this whole shifting situation.

IV

A splendid career of undoubted brilliance and unusual courage devoted in the end, then, to lost causes? Some of Said's late essays, most obviously the ruminative 'On Lost Causes', collected in *Reflections on Exile* (2001), would seem almost to court this verdict. In that piece, Said begins with some observations on the importance of hope and conviction to the success of any cause, and notes the degree to which any political struggle must therefore also be a psychological struggle, a battle of wills 'in which one side attempts to pile up one achievement or "actual fact" after another in the hope of discouraging people on the other side, demonstrating to them that they can have no hope of winning'. From thence he proceeds to some remarks on what had always been a pet theme: the nineteenth-century novel's obsession with the distance travelled between adolescent aspiration and defeated adult accommodation to the status quo, and then on to Swift's satire, which implies, Said says, 'that when the moment for summing-up finally occurs we must be ready to say without the least fudging that human existence simply defeats all causes, good or bad'.¹²

This then leads into an extended rueful meditation on recent post-Oslo Palestinian history, a period, in Said's view, of abject exhaustion and capitulation. Nothing new in that verdict, though here the sense of capitulation and 'making the best of a bad job' is extended to the Palestinian nation generally, not just to its delinquent leadership, and here there is less conviction than usual that the current period of national exhaustion will be followed by another energetic recovery. Norman Finkelstein's minatory essay on the relentless and in the end irreversible attrition of the Cherokee nation¹³, a fate that Finkelstein fears may also await the Palestinians, is cited without demur; history, Said remarks, is full of peoples who gave up and accepted a life of servitude, their very existence now mostly forgotten.

As 'On Lost Causes' draws towards conclusion, Said asks:

But does the consciousness and even the actuality of a lost cause entail that sense of defeat and resignation that we associate with the abjections of capitulation and the dishonor of grinning or bowing survivors who opportunistically fawn on their conquerors and seek to ingratiate themselves with the new dispensation? Must it always result in the broken will and demoralized pessimism of the defeated?

In response, he concludes: 'I think not, although the alternative is a difficult and extremely precarious one, at least on the level of the individual.' Adorno's rejection of 'the foolish wisdom of resignation' is cited approvingly, as are his injunctions against the false consolation and phoney sense of empowerment that the individual can secure by surrendering her or himself to the latest collective consensus. The essay ends with Said's endorsement of Adorno's defence of uncompromising critical thinking even in conditions of impotence. Rejecting, on the one side, 'groundless optimism and illusory hope' and, on the other, a paralysed defeat or cynical despair, Said closes by remarking that, 'Consciousness of the possibility of resistance can reside only in the individual will that is fortified by intellectual rigor and an unabated conviction in the need to begin again, with no guarantee, except, as Adorno says, the confidence of even the loneliest and most impotent thought that "what has been cogently thought must be thought in some other place and by other people"'. 'We might well ask from this perspective,' Said's last sentence begs the question, 'if any lost cause can ever really be lost.'¹⁴

One is drawn to Adorno's brackish well of consolation perhaps only in a very dry season. It is characteristic of Said, however, that a fundamentally gloomy and melancholy essay on lost causes, an essay that exudes some visceral sense of the physically and spiritually exhausting struggle against illness and a sense of the imminence of his own death, should modulate eventually into a scavenging search for resources of hope, resources of

resuscitation, and with a reaffirmation of the worth and dignity of intellectual cognition even in situations where the intellectual's capacity to translate thought into action remains nugatory.

In the third chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* with which I began earlier, that note had also been struck. Commenting on the achievements of the 'voyage in' in that chapter, Said did not scant the fact that the great efflorescence of imaginative writing and intellectual work to which he paid tribute had been stimulated by anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles that had often issued in only very modest political success, indeed sometimes in downright failure. The dire conditions that prevail in so much of the 'Third World' in the wake of the dismantling of the old European empires could hardly be ignored. But, for Said, the essential point to be underlined was that the intellectual and imaginative work that had gone into the making of anti-colonial struggles of the late twentieth century were not negated by the actual failures of such struggles. These intellectual and imaginative interventions were, he asserted, 'not only an integral part of a political movement, but, in many ways, the movement's *successfully* guiding imagination'.¹⁵ Their cumulative weight or critical mass, therefore, could not be indexed to their immediate returns or dividends; their value rested also in their ongoing capacity to impregnate or illuminate further struggles for the future. In other words, even if the Algerian or African or West Indian or Palestinian or Irish national struggles had variously either degenerated or run aground in exhaustion, the works of a Fanon or Césaire or James or Darwish or Guha or Yeats had, in any case, already opened a vent at least to a possible future beyond imperialism and Eurocentrism, and they retained, moreover, the capacity to inspire new generations of intellectuals, writers and activists to renew their commitments to the actualization of an emancipation that has always to be sustained in the very first instance at the level of imaginative possibility.

In his later years, as the toll of his illness and the plight of his people became increasingly dire, Adorno's importance for Said seems to have grown ever deeper. Yet one also senses a significant difference between the two to the end. Though Said tended always to favour Adorno over Lukács, preferring the former's uncompromising independence to the latter's pact with the devil, there is something to be said for the idea that when confronted with his own historical choices, Said opted to make his own pact with the devil rather than, like Adorno, to make the best of impotence. The 'devil' in Said's case is not, of course, Arafat, but commitment, activism, engagement, intervention; the point, in other words, is that for much of his career, Said, perhaps like Lukács in this at least, tried his damndest to be the conscience of the party, to devote himself actively to the cause of

collective emancipation, to intervene where and when he could, because he was utterly dedicated to the justice of the cause, even if not to the party that commanded it. Any such pact will always exact its toll, but so too, of course in different ways, will retreat and reconciliation or accommodation or, as Said would put it, 'making the best of a bad job'.

In Adorno's work, as in the quotation Said cites above, there is, in contrast, the unmistakable impression of the lonely majesty of the solitary intellectual keeping sentry at the watchtowers to the future and remaining defiantly athwart the drift of the times. This was a stance Said also liked to strike on occasion, but in his case, unlike Adorno's, I think, it is repeatedly countermanded by a contrapuntal tendency, everywhere evident in his writings, to inventory wider spirals and lineages of writers and intellectuals whom he identified as fellow travellers. In Said's work, as in Adorno's, the crisis of the modern intellectual is also inflected by the radical melancholy of a survivor from the old high bourgeois classes contemplating with considerable distaste the tacky new world of national and ethnic chauvinisms, mass culture and consumerism that invades everything, even the university and the 'old world' high cultures to which they were each devoted. But there is a compulsively travelling, restlessly inquisitive, addictively interventionist and incurably sociable Said that was always, to the very last, excited by political struggles and new voices emerging in the world within or beyond Europe, something one never finds in the late Adorno. This must ultimately be ascribed, perhaps, to the fact that Said, unlike his great modernist mentor, belonged not just to an irreparably devastated old world, but – contradictorily, contrarily, schizophrenically, unhappily – to an emerging new one as well.

Notes

- 1 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 234.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 295, 235.
- 3 Stephen Howe, 'Edward Said: the Traveller and the Exile', www.mahfoum.com/press6/163C35.htm.
- 4 Mahmoud Darwish, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2003.
- 5 Aijaz Ahmad, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"', in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London: Verso, 1992), pp. 104–5.
- 6 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 363.
- 7 The literature here is extensive, but perhaps the most widely debated text on this issue is Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- 8 Edward Said, 'Reflections on American "Left" Literary Criticism' in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 158.
- 9 *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60 (*italics in the original*).

- 10 Ibid., pp. 160, 172, 177.
- 11 See especially Chapter 7, 'Cultural Wars and Cultural Studies', in Readings, *The University in Ruins*, pp. 89–118.
- 12 Edward Said, 'On Lost Causes' in *Reflections on Exile, and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2001), pp. 529, 540.
- 13 See Norman Finkelstein, 'History's Verdict', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 24:4 (Summer 1995), pp. 32–45.
- 14 Edward Said, 'On Lost Causes' in *Reflections on Exile*, pp. 552–3.
- 15 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 256.