

Edward W. Said: Overcoming Orientalism

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EDWARD SAID was a prolific author who made major contributions to various aspects of modern scholarship. These disparate contributions to literary theory, the history of ideas, music, the sociology of intellectuals, and political analysis were integrated around a critique of western assumptions about other cultures, namely around his critique of Orientalism. In 1978 *Orientalism* launched his international academic reputation and it has remained central to understanding his work, including his more overtly political journalism on Israel and the Palestinian movement. His study, which applied Michel Foucault's methods to the textual analysis of the history of western (predominantly French) interpretations of the Orient, has often been narrowly interpreted. At one level *Orientalism* examined the literary conditions by which a static and regressive Orient was constantly reproduced in western literature, but Said had a larger purpose which was to see how scholarship could transcend simple dichotomies of East and West. He looked to the history of philology and Oriental sciences to see how negative Otherness could be transcended by a broader moral vision of the common culture of humanity. His work on Orientalism radically transformed the field of Oriental studies.

This intellectual quest was closely related to his personal history in which he experienced the modern world from the standpoint of an exile. A major component of his discussion of intellectuals and Orientalism has been somewhat neglected, namely his tentative and uncertain moves towards what we may refer to as 'an ethic of cosmopolitan care' which charted a way out of Orientalism. His recent autobiography *Out of Place* (1999) captured his persistent mood of exile and dislocation. He was partly situated in the West in his identity as 'Edward' and partly in the East in his role as 'Said'. His scholarly concerns were consistently focused on such

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cultural dislocations – Joseph Conrad and colonialism, Erich Auerbach's exile in writing *Mimesis* (1953), or Louis Massignon's *The Passion of al-Hallaj*. Said's literary scholarship was directed towards understanding how certain major intellectuals in western intellectual life crossed prohibited borders. In his inquiry into Orientalism, literary theory and philology, certain key figures such as Auerbach, Conrad, Massignon, Naipaul, Schwab, and Renan uncovered possibilities of transcending the problem of the excluded and denigrated outsider. Disciples of Said have been content too frequently to take the critique of Orientalism for granted, merely exploring further complexities in the divisions between Occident and Orient. Said's purpose by contrast was not merely to understand these divisions of discourse, but to overcome them. While cultural theory has subsequently remained content with the view that western literature has produced a persistently prejudicial view of the Orient, especially Islam, Said sought to avoid the 'rhetorics of blame' associated with Orientalism and struggled tirelessly to demonstrate, for example in *Representations of the Intellectual*, that 'cultures are too intermingled, their contents and histories too interdependent and hybrid, for surgical separation into large and mostly ideological oppositions like Orient and Occident' (Said, 1994: xi). The tragic nature of the history of Palestine, the bloody confrontations in the Middle East, the failure to achieve peace with justice, and the increasingly predatory nature of American foreign policy never seriously deterred him from this ethic of care.

His engagement with the question of Islam was a continuous aspect of his life in both scholarship and politics, but this engagement was related to other issues such as the role of the intellectual. This role is bound up inevitably with both the creation and the critique of borders – physical, national, cultural and spiritual. The critical intellectual must go beyond the suffering of particular nations and cultures to explore the universal aspects of human suffering and oppression, that is 'to universalize the crisis, to give greater scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the suffering of others' (Said, 1994: 33). This critical distance – the inevitably ironic tone of genuine philosophical inquiry – will often look like national disloyalty, but this critical process means that the radical intellectual is a political and spiritual exile. Said's criticisms of the Palestinian administration is a case in point. This definition of the radical intellectual does not mean however that intellectuals are 'completely adrift in self-indulgent subjectivity' (Said, 1994:72). The intellectual has to find a balance, however precarious, between loyalty to their own national cultures, especially where those national cultures are under political and military threat, and commitment to international norms of morality and human rights (Said, 1993). In his political writing on the Palestinian movement and the Middle East, Said maintained this moral position with respect to borders. In the 1990s his controversial writing (Said, 1999) on the political opportunities for Palestinians and Israelis in which he implored the combatants to cross the 'rhetorical barricades' was directly related to

the cultural essays on Oriental scholars in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1984) and *Orientalism* (1978).

Said was clearly not adverse to controversy. His intellectual endeavours were hitched to the Palestinian cause and he was a determined opponent of Zionism, but he also wrote movingly about the genocide of the Armenians and ironically recognized the historical parallel between hostility to Islam and anti-Semitism. Shakespeare did not figure large in Said's literary pantheon, but he would have appreciated that, if Caliban represented a formative figure in European colonial literature, Shylock presents another troublesome dimension. *The Merchant of Venice* had explored Christian hostility to the Jew in Elizabethan England, but Shylock is almost incomprehensible as a character – is he the hero or the villain of the plot? He bleeds when he is pricked, but his behaviour is morally reprehensible. Orientalist commentary has not noticed the ironic connection between two forms of racism, namely against Arabs and against Jews. The connection did not however go undetected by Said. In the introduction to *Orientalism* Said (1978: 27–8) wrote that in 'addition, and by an almost inescapable logic, I have found myself writing the history of a strange, secret sharer of Western anti-Semitism. That anti-Semitism and, as I have discussed it in its Islamic branch, Orientalism resemble each other very closely is a historical, cultural and political truth that needs only be mentioned to an Arab Palestinian for its irony to be perfectly understood'. Islamophobia and anti-Semitism have common roots, but there are two distinct discourses of Semitic Orientalism. While Islam had been defined by its absences (legal rationality, autonomous cities, asceticism and citizenship), Judaism had been defined by the contradictory nature of its religious injunctions in which according to Max Weber (1952) its dietary laws transformed the quest for personal salvation into merely ritualistic prescriptions, thereby inhibiting the realization of its monotheistic rationalism. It is a measure of Said's moral stature that he did not neglect the historical irony of anti-Semitism.

Said identified scholars whose work attempted to transcend the narrow academic limitations of the Orientalist tradition of which they were inextricably members. We need to read *Orientalism* alongside his observations on Ernest Renan, Louis Massignon and Raymond Schwab in *The World, The Text and the Critic*. For example Massignon's *The Passion of al-Hallaj* provides a theological and historical analysis of the religious significance of the Baghdad mystic Mansur al-Hallaj who became a martyr for peace in 922. In Massignon's theology, al-Hallaj was a religious figure through whom it is possible to apprehend the mystical truths of both Christianity and Islam. Through suffering human beings learn compassion, and through compassion scholars may come sympathetically to understand and appreciate other cultures. Massignon, who had been converted to Islam in Iraq in 1908, also practised as a Christian priest, was also a political figure who became involved in the protests against the Algerian War. In 1961 he struggled with friends to drag the bodies of murdered Algerians from the Seine.

Massignon's mystical theology demonstrated how religious experiences of the divine presence in different traditions provide a common understanding of human alienation and humanity's need for reconciliation.

Raymond Schwab was equally important in Said's vision of intellectual responsibility towards other cultures. Schwab's task was to comprehend the impact of the Orient on the West in the period 1770–1850, roughly that is from the French Revolution to the high tide of western imperialism in the Middle East. In this period, Orientalism became a great adventure of human consciousness in which the polarities between Orient and Occident fortuitously produced new humanistic possibilities, namely a renaissance. While the first Renaissance asserted the similarities and commonalities of European cultures, the second Renaissance constructed a culture of differences through its comparative philology, historical studies and sociology. Orientalism expressed the European need to assimilate and absorb the Other through a set of linguistic strategies, but Schwab's own position was driven by an implicit notion of 'integral humanism', the need for a dynamic humanism which could transcend these differences. Schwab's studies further serve to remind us that China was seen, for example by Enlightenment philosophers and the Jesuits, as the cradle of technology and civilization. Confucianism was a source of wisdom not unreason.

Schwab's *La Renaissance orientale* (1950) traced the early stages of Orientalism, especially the growth of Sanskrit studies, and provided the context for Said's own *Orientalism*. Schwab examined the problem of intellectual responsibility towards other cultures through a detailed analysis of the rise of translation and interpretation. Said's sympathetic introduction to the English translation of Schwab's history (1984) was reprinted in *The World, the Text and the Critic*, and hence Schwab rather than Foucault set Said's agenda: to understand Europe's appropriation of Islam and the Middle East alongside the second-Renaissance research on India and China, and to probe the problem of intellectual responsibility for and with other cultures. From these studies, Said absorbed the original message of philology that all human languages have a common origin. It was not until the Victorian age that human cultures were racialized and there emerged the view that humankind was differentiated by grammars that were largely incommensurable. Said's epistemology has been mistakenly interpreted by overzealous students as merely that of social constructionism and cultural relativism. The task which he has set us is far more challenging, and hence more important than mere relativism.

In conclusion, Said's vision of intellectuals and exile offers a defence of cosmopolitanism, which is the worldview of scholars in a political context where globalization, cultural hybridity and multiculturalism are re-writing the traditional Orientalist agenda. Said's understanding of Auerbach provided a model of the cosmopolitan intellectual. Auerbach was important for establishing two propositions. Firstly, the field of philology was human culture as a whole, and secondly we have to leave our national and metaphorical homes in order to appreciate the value of philological humanism.

Our aspiration must be that, because of their exposure to global concerns and global issues, cosmopolitan intellectuals might, in recognizing the ubiquity of cultural hybridity, reject all claims to cultural superiority and cultural dominance.

These humanistic values – the real legacy of comparative literature – flow abundantly from Said's analysis of the limitations and dangers of traditional Orientalism, his vision of the exilic intellectual, and his political engagement with the Palestinian national movement. The achievement of those values was his constant concern; the realization of those values in modern scholarship has been rendered infinitely more difficult by his demise.

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