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Edward Said, as virtually no one else in literary and cultural studies in America during the last two decades, became the conscience of our profession. By conscience I mean that scholars, teachers, and critics of literature looked more often to him than to any other colleague not only for how to reframe their subject but, still more significantly, for how to reconstrue their task -- even when, on individual issues and questions, they may not have agreed with him in all particulars or been able to follow exactly where he led. The only other Anglo-American critic and scholar and public intellectual who in different ways served a comparable function for his own peers was Raymond Williams.

I make this claim without pretending to be an expert in most of the traditions, texts, or topics in which Said himself was a master. Though I have read at one time or another most of his major books on literature and related matters, all I can claim is a certain familiarity with the generation of American literary and critical intellectuals to which Said belonged, since I belong to the same one, and all I can attest is some of the ways in which, more than any other national figure, he broadened our conceptual horizons and deepened our sense of the “gravitas,” to use a word favored in describing his own criticism, toward which our own work should aspire.

Said showed us how critical inquiry could take on moral traction in at least three different but related ways. Politically he did so by contending that the geographies of feeling which in literature must be submitted to, expressed through, and realized in the disciplines of form are nonetheless – and often in ways sometimes disguised even from their authors, when not purposely disguised by their authors -- expressions of power,

modes of manipulation, conceits of control. Said knew that there is nothing, strictly speaking, “innocent” either about the act of writing or the act of reading. These both are, as we now say, “situated” undertakings that require the utmost tact as well as cunning, learning as well as discernment, to detect what the American philosopher John Dewey would have called their “prejudices” and to mount a sufficiently informed critique of them.

Historically Said broadened our conceptional horizons by insisting, against all formalisms and formalists, that literary and discursive texts are not so much embedded in history as sedimented with history. He also insisted, however, that the history with which texts are sedimented rarely fits within some rigid Foucauldian formula of subversion and containment because it belongs to what he called “the essential unmasterable presence that constitutes a large part of historical and social situations.” But this affirmation could cut in two different ways. Accepting the notion that there is “an irreducible subjective core to human experience” did not mean that this subjective fundament is inaccessible to “analysis and interpretation.” It simply meant that this irreducible essence was “not exhausted by totalizing theories, not marked and limited by doctrinal or national lines, not confined once and for all to analytical constructs.” As he went on, the historicity of that experience is precisely what, as Gramsci had taught him, made it impossible to develop an analysis of it around “exclusions,” as Said called them, “that stipulate, for instance, that only women can understand feminine experience, only Jews can understand Jewish suffering, only formerly colonial subjects can understand colonial experience.” While these were scarcely sentiments that would endear him to the politically correct, Said was convinced on empirical grounds that such exclusions “give rise to polarizations

that absolve and forgive ignorance and demagoguery more than they enable knowledge.” His predilection was therefore to see literary texts less as, in deconstructionist terms, undecidable objects, or as, in some variants of Marxist criticism, ideological templates, than as sites of effective action, scenes of forceful or fateful statement, with “consequences, Said noted, voicing the pragmatist side to his temperament, “that criticism should make it its business to reveal.”

Critically Said widened and complicated our intellectual and methodological horizons by refusing to define those same consequences in terms of the solecisms or soporifics of Grand Theory, reminding us again and again that reductionism, essentialism, totalism, and absolutism are all opiates of the intellectually indolent which can, and often do, lead to mental oppression. This is not for a moment to say that his criticism was untheoretical, much less anti-theory. Said’s criticism is theoretical to the bone if theory refers to any discourse that treats literature and/or culture as in some sense problematic and then attempts, as Gerald Graff once nicely put it, to formulate the nature of that problematic in general terms. Said could thus “take pride,” as he stated in one of his last books, “in playing a part in the [theoretical and critical] revision which has expressed itself in a critique of Eurocentrism, the display of the relative poverty of identity politics, the silliness of affirming the purity of an essential essence, and the utter falseness of ascribing to one tradition a kind of priority over all others.”

One very important key to the way he deployed these convictions was based on a distinction he made between the "religious" and the "secular" in his moving and important book The World, the Text, and the Critic. A differentiation that was quickly to become for some of his contemporaries nearly canonical, it always struck me as

somewhat inaccurate and misleading. On the one hand, the distinction seemed to treat as almost ontological a set of terms that since the Early Modern Era can only be understood in specific historical contexts. On the other, it treated these same terms as oppositional when they have rarely functioned historically, or for that matter theologically, as a simple binary. Quite apart from whether such stark oppositions can be thought, much less practiced, since “thinking the opposite,” as Derrida would say, “is still in complicity with the classical alternatives,” the so-called secular has often been created in no small measure out of elements of the religious that emerge as much from a relaxation of its constraints as from an outright repudiation of them. Thus what appears in actual processes of secularization to be a rejection or negation of the religious—merely consider the history of the novel -- is more often than not a reconstruction of the world out of those interpretive activities that must be brought into play if some other form of certitude is to take its place.

Nonetheless for Said the distinction was crucial because it highlighted values that for him were central. An ethical issue that functioned as much, perhaps, as a matter of scruple as of principle, it seemed to come down to a question of discourse, of rhetoric, and here the humanist in Said sided unequivocally with the modernist in Wallace Stevens. If one dare not presume, as Stevens had warned in “Chocorua to Its Neighbor,” “to say more than human things with human voice,” neither should one attempt to “say human things with more/Than human voice.” The only alternative was to speak “humanly from the height or from the depth/Of human things; that is acutest speech.”

By “religious criticism,” then, Said did not mean criticism that operates exclusively from within the shelter of some traditional form of religious orthodoxy; he

meant instead all criticism that defers normatively, if not also politically, to what is conceived as an expression of, in his terms, "transhuman authority." Evidence of the "religious" was therefore to be found not only in the eruption of religious fundamentalism all over the world (Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, and even Buddhist, as well as Muslim) but also in the increased role now played in contemporary intellectual life by what he called the "Manichean theologizing of 'the Other.'" This theologization of "the Other" was clearly apparent in the tendency to convert such notions as the Orient, the Feminine, History, Terrorism, the West, Blackness, the Third World, Logocentricity, Communism, America, God, or Democracy into vague, semi-sacred, abstractions of contrast. But it could also be detected in the recurrent methodological recourse typical of so much contemporary criticism to, on the one side, forms of impassability, indecipherability, the unthinkable, the abyss of meaning, nothingness, and silence, and, on the other, to appeals to magic, mysticism, divine necessity, ultimacy, or the unquestionable. Reflecting a terrible, almost unappeasable, need in our time for a kind of human assuagement that only the largest and crudest metaphysical generalizations can provide, he also felt that such appeals promote and justify a dangerous kind of "uncriticality" that shares with much other religious discourse an interest in premature closure, metanarrative, and blind subservience to transcendence.

Over against this deference to the metaphysics of cultural alterity, Said sought to establish a criticism that was by contrast worldly, skeptical, iconoclastic, and avowedly "secular." The antithesis of what he called "organized dogma," secular criticism, as he understood and promoted it, is suspicious of most universalizing moves, wary of all reifications, and discontent with all professional "guilds, special interests, imperialized

fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind." Opposed to every form of intellectual and emotional manipulation and control, "secular criticism" should seek to advance what Said called, naming one of his own intellectual ideals, "non-coercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom." "Secular criticism" was therefore "oppositional" insofar as it served to challenge and, where possible, to dismantle all the forms in which literary and historical study has, whether intentionally or not, collaborated in the maintenance of cultural pieties, and Said associated the possibility for such thinking with a criticism that is at its best broadly comparative and emphatically historicist.

Said found a second, and sometimes even more effective, key to the deployment of the critical, along with the political and the historical, in the performance of a specific kind of moral vigilance. That vigilance expressed itself in an effort to expose the more vicious forms of what he called, in the title of his most famous book, "Orientalism." Referring to a practice more than a profession, the term "Orientalism," as Said employed it, shifted our attention away from methods and even subjects of inquiry to the modes by which cultures control and manipulate one another merely by virtue of the ways they represent and talk about each other. But the term itself possessed as well a much more specific provenance and range of governance. "Orientalism" referred explicitly to the special place that the Middle and Far East have held in the European (and, latterly, the American) imagination ever since they offered themselves to the West not simply as objects of formal study but also as sources of Western self-validation. The term "Orientalism" has thus now entered the critical lexicon, though not without contestation, in fields far distant from literary studies as a blanket term to describe any and all

instances when the so-called West has constructed critical generalizations about the so-called East for the sake of reinforcing its own self-image as superior.

This is perhaps not the place -- and I am not, in any case, the person -- to try to sort all this out, but there is no question that if the term “Orientalism” aroused in some quarters considerable resistance because of its critical unwieldiness, its potential for simplification, and its tacit employment of the same binarist thinking that it wishes to put in question, it nevertheless managed to sensitize many of us to the cultural politics of knowledge and confirmed in us a belief shared by all but the willfully ignorant or the prejudicially indifferent that collective identities, no less than personal ones, are constructed so frequently at the expense of those in contrast to whom they imagined. To put this more simply, Said’s book convinced us, along with great deal of other writing along similar lines, that societies and civilizations, just like selves, are too often disposed – and not just in the West -- to create themselves by means of the inferiorization, the disparagement, and sometimes even the demonization, of the culturally different.

Such wisdom may not in itself have constituted “new news,” but to see its effects played out in Western literary and cultural texts of the last several centuries, not only in Orientalism but in a host of other studies from the earlier, magisterial Beginnings and the later, still more impressive Culture and Imperialism to volumes like the already mentioned The World, the Text, and the Critic, Reflections of an Exile, Covering Islam, Representations of the Intellectual, and Freud and the Non-European afforded us all an extraordinary challenge to further learning, to extending and deepening our range of focus. While none of this was purchased without friction, disagreement, mistakes, exaggeration, or excesses, it still schooled the closest of Said’s readers in the difference

between a political criticism that is merely reductive and self-righteous and one that is advocative, internationalist, and self-reflexive.

The third and last key that helps explain how Said deployed his concerns in behalf of his own generation's extended self-education has everything to do with what he meant by the term "world" and how he revised so many of our former, more reassuring, images of it. The world he tended more and more to place before his readers, thinking in particular of the last several decades, was one roiled by vast human migrations provoked by war, by colonialism and decolonization, by economic and political revolution, and by "such devastating occurrences as famine, ethnic cleansing, and great power machinations." It was a world that often caused him immense, almost visceral dismay and outrage as he battled against cancer, but it was a world in which he refused to be anything other than relentlessly engaged.

There may always have been something of William James in Edward Said, the James who maintained that the only place for the genuine thinker is at the center of a battle, but in any case he epitomized for my own generation the courage it takes to act on such beliefs. That courage simultaneously exposed him to great personal dangers while at the same time deservedly earning him greater admiration than any other literary intellectual. His own orientation to that world of uprooted people – and not simply because of his enormous responsibilities as the most important American spokesperson for the Palestinian cause – embodied his increasing feeling of exile in his own country. Yet that sense of exile was complemented by a certain cosmopolitanism that gave him, at least symbolically, residence almost anywhere in the world where people had been

compelled to recreate their sense of themselves out of the experience of upheaval and displacement.

This is no doubt why he felt so drawn to New York City, the newest “capital of the world,” as he termed it, which was itself created by immigrants and displaced persons. It gave him a sense of place in a world of dislocation where, among other things, he could, as he wrote, “live out the meanings of the re-emergence of the Palestinian people as a political force, despite the death threats, acts of vandalism, and verbal abuse directed at him and his family.” His feeling for the world in that place steeled his writing against almost all critical and theoretical fashions and at the same time turned his prose into an instrument more direct, supple, eloquent, and ethically uncompromising than the writing of nearly all his contemporaries. In addition, this site of exile, where he felt, as he titled his 1999 memoir, “out of place,” furnished him with an evaluative criterion and agenda that he called “worldliness.”

“Worldliness,” when applied to critical responsibilities, referred to an obligation to link works together in order to “bring them out of the neglect and secondariness to which for all kinds of political and ideological reasons they had previously been condemned.” In other terms, “wordliness” constituted the recuperation and re-location of such works and their interpretations in what Said called their “global setting.” Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park deserved to be read, as he insisted at the risk of outraging many, against the background of the shadow cast by the depredations of Empire. Tayeb Salih’s great Sudanese novel Season of Migration to the North cried out for interpretation as a rewriting, like N’gugi wa Thiong’o’s The River Between, no less than V.S. Naipaul’s The Bend in the River, of Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. Moby-Dick demanded to be seen

as, among other things, a brief, sometimes satirical, sometimes deadly earnest, against America's quest for global governance. Defining that setting in contrast to all forms of cultural separatism and exclusivism, he argued that the restoration sought by a global criticism could only be accomplished by appreciating that literary and cultural texts dwell not in "some tiny, defensively constituted corner of the world" but in "the large, many-windowed house of human culture as a whole."

This is why Said deserves to be called a global critic. Repudiating all facile generalizations about globalization, he nonetheless established as the aim of all criticism worthy of the name the re-situation of the works of the imagination in the context of all the human quests for meaning that inform them. Little wonder that he found himself drawn back again and again, as he wrote in the closing pages of Cultural and Imperialism, to the words, quoted by Erich Auerbach in Mimesis, of Hugo of St. Victor: "the man who finds his country sweet is only a raw beginner; the man for whom each country is as his [or her] own is already strong; but only the man for whom the whole world is as a foreign country is perfect."

Giles Gunn