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IN THE WAKE OF EDWARD SAID¹

My background is a series of displacements and expatriations which cannot ever be recuperated.²

THE DEATH OF EDWARD SAID, while not unexpected, nevertheless results in a shock to thought as if it is impossible to grasp the loss of so exceptional a theorist and critic. Due not only to his stature as one of the foremost among contemporary critics but also to his passion in transgressing theory with a political *poiesis*, the death of Said portends a long convalescence in which that broad range of discourse referred to as "Theory" will no doubt move away from the fundamental encounter between the multiple sites Said insists are at work in literature and toward what he referred to as "religious criticism." In all of his writing Said adopted the perspective of the "worldliness" or secularity of criticism that does not so much negate or invert the space of the divine, so to speak, as affirm what he calls in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* "the resistance and heterogeneity of civil society" as a different beginning and practice of criticism than the current fashion which may be described as a "flight into method and system...[that] risk[s] becoming wall to wall discourse."³ Although theory today is charmed with the idea of the multiple, plural, and heterogeneous these last are subject to that larger term the "ambiguous" which Said rightly identifies with religious criticism claiming that it "shuts off investigation."⁴ By looking at a retrospective of interviews recently published (*Power, Politics, and*

¹ This retrospective had originally begun as a review of a few books concerning post-structuralism, religion, and violence but upon the death of Edward Said, I asked if I could rather concentrate on Said's work. The editors of the JCRT kindly permitted me the opportunity to write this retrospective and for that I am grateful. I must also mention in regard to this last, Fouad Moughrabi who listened with his usual patience and generosity at my plan for the retrospective as well as Loretta Korolewicz and Jennifer Price who offered several suggestions in terms of style and content.

² Imre Salusinszky "Literary Theory at the Crossroads of Public Life," in *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews With Edward Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (New York: Vintage, 2001), 70. In the footnotes the are cited by the interviewer and title of the interview and, unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from Said.

³ Edward Said *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 25-26.
⁴ Said *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, 290.

Culture) and a collection of essays (*Reflections on Exile*) as well as his "Thoughts About America," I hope to show that what typifies Said's writings is an erudition that resists becoming "deliberately obscure."⁵

Recent studies of Said that touch on questions of theory, methodology and territorialities within his thought do a severe *theoretical* disservice to the question of style by focusing on issues that are commonly considered proper to theory. Although Abdirahman Hussein's recent *Edward Said: Criticism and Society* is an amazingly masterful work to the degree that it offers a sort of theoretical cartography, it typifies this common approach to Said. Hussein wants to distinguish among the various Saids where no distinction is necessary and, in fact, where such distinction, I would suggest, undermines the particularity of Said's dialectical style.⁶ By this I mean that in his attempt to catalogue what Gramsci refers to as the "infinity of traces,"⁷ Said has developed a dialectical style that is at once sumptuous and pleasant to read and, at the same time, eviscerates the status of theory as something (and of the theorist as someone) discrete, hermetic, and inactive. Much, for example, has been rightly made of Said's methodological debt to Foucault without, however, at the same time understanding that his distance from Foucault is marked by what Said recognized as Foucault's move away from political activism: "By the end of his life, I think, Foucault was simply uninterested in any direct political involvement of any sort."⁸ He was also to suggest that Foucault viewed power from the position "that ultimately very little resistance was possible to the controls of a disciplinary or carceral society."⁹ Indeed, in *Orientalism*, which is thought to be the work in which Said is closest to Foucault, Said suggests a distinction: "I didn't want Foucault's method, or anybody's method, to override what I was trying to put forward. The notion of a kind of non-coercive knowledge, which I come to at the end of the book, was deliberately anti-Foucault."¹⁰ Fundamentally, for Said, Foucault was methodologically bound to assimilation and acculturation and what was needed, from *Beginnings* to "Thoughts About America" was an insurgent discourse, like Fanon's, not theoretically predisposed to submission.

⁵ This phrase occurs in Said's description of religious criticism: "There is an increase in the number of fixed special languages, many of them impenetrable, deliberately obscure, willfully illogical." Edward Said *The World, The Text, and the Critic*, 292.

⁶ See, for example, the discussion of "the Said of *Orientalism*, *Covering Islam*, and *Culture and Imperialism*." Abdirahman Hussein *Edward Said: Criticism and Society* (New York and London: Verso, 2002), 224ff.

⁷ Given the penchant of contemporary theory to raise the issue of "trace" this quote from Gramsci is particularly beautiful. Although the trace usually designates ambiguity, Gramsci, and I take the quote from Said, suggests there is an "imperative" to compile an "inventory" of the "infinity of traces" left as a product of the historical process on the subject. Quoted in Edward Said *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 25.

⁸ Salusinszky "Literary Theory at the Crossroads of Public Life," 77.

⁹ Gary Hentzi and Anne McClintock "Overlapping Territories: The World, The Text, And The Critic," in *Power, Politics, and Culture*, 53.

¹⁰ Salusinszky "Literary Theory at the Crossroads of Public Life," 80.

Said's distinction as a committed intellectual can only be understood against the background of the Palestinian's historical experience. This includes not only the utter horrors associated with dispossession, exile and occupation, exemplified in the gruesome atrocities committed at the camps of Sabra and Chatila,¹¹ but also the passion that emerges in the context of resistance and the construction of a humane and democratic future. For Said, exile is double edged in that, although as an exile his life is torn by a loss that will never be recuperated, he never communicates in his work the somnambulism of a Beckett character who, nevertheless, simply "must go on." He writes of this last with regard to Conrad for whom exile is a "wound" that is exploited and converted into an "aesthetic principle."¹² At the same time, in Said's hands the experience of being a Palestinian, of the irrecoverable loss of "home" and homeland and of the atrocities that have been passed over in silence by "the news" never translate into the *resentiment* of an exclusive nationalism based on religion or ethnicity. Living as a Palestinian exile made it necessary for Said to exist, as he says, "between worlds"¹³ without succumbing to an Orwellian "tourism among the dogs."¹⁴ This last, of course, is born of the security that one really is "at home somewhere."¹⁵ If, finally, it is possible to catalogue the "infinity of traces" that constitute Edward Said, it is his share in the fate and future of the Palestinian people that resonates through and gives shape to his work as it is considered here.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of *Power, Politics, and Culture* is that it allows us to look back over the career of Said from what must be viewed as a prolific, energetic, and passionate quarter century and to rethink our understanding of Said's work from his own perspective. These interviews aid us, for example, in writing about Said without doing violence to his texts even if we apply our own categories to the multiplicity of his projects as I did above by using the term *poeisis*. The greatest danger when reading Said, or any critic, is the conflation of their discourses to simple terms. In light of this last a great deal has been made of Said's use of "secular criticism" or "the worldly" as if he wanted to narrow interpretive possibilities. Quite the contrary is actually the case. What has happened to Said with regard to the question of the worldliness of criticism is not unfamiliar to religious theorists. Ricoeur's *Essai sur Freud* accomplished a

¹¹ Sabra and Chatila were camps in Lebanon. After the Israelis had withdrawn from Lebanon in a deal brokered by the Reagan Administration, on condition the armed Palestinians leave southern Lebanon, the Israelis reoccupied the territory surrounding the camps and facilitated the murder of an estimated 3,000 people. One of the few persons to witness the aftermath was the French author Jean Genet. He writes hauntingly of one atrocity: "They had crucified one woman alive. I saw the body, with the arms outstretched and covered with flies, especially round the tips of her hands: there were ten blackening clots of blood where they had cut off the top joints of her fingers." Jean Genet *Prisoner of Love*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: New York Review Books, 2003), 42.

¹² Edward Said "Reflections on Exile" in *Reflections on Exile And Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 180.

¹³ See Edward Said "Between Worlds," in *Essays on Exile*, 554-568.

¹⁴ Edward Said "Tourism Among the Dogs," in *Reflections on Exile*, 93-97.

¹⁵ Said "Tourism Among the Dogs," 94; his emphasis.

similar feat with regard to the so-called masters of suspicion: to get around the 19th century's critiques of religion (which extend in actuality from Kant to Nietzsche and Freud) Ricoeur made the assumption that the critiques only touched upon the language used by religious persons and that what we could refer to as the space of the divine remained sacrosanct. The space of the divine, in other words, is the site that guarantees a cheap multiplicity through the valorization of ambiguity and undecidability; and, within the work of religious theory such a position is almost hegemonic. Worldliness has played a major role within Said's discourse from *Beginnings* through *The World, the Text, and the Critic* to *Musical Elaborations*. This suggests that it is the historical traces running through texts, the possibility of reading these as historical (without a capital H) experiences and political realities, and not their extermination in the search for History, the Sacred, the Plural, the Ambiguous, or Whatever that makes it possible to constitute the multiplicity at the heart of discourse. Multiplicity comes into being, not as an end in itself, but as a political act in which the "heterogeneity of civil society" erodes the hegemony at work in the apparatuses of interpretation within "Theory".

Said's remark that Jameson and Chomsky have given up on political action must be understood as a refusal of the full implications of worldliness, a result of critics refusing to move beyond the political implications of their work and address "actual people and communities." This refusal takes two forms: Chomsky is said to be unwilling to be "involved in the messy details of the back and forth movement with a community" and Jameson seems content to merely address the "community of philosophical theorists, or liberated theorists."¹⁶ Such a problem, the constitution of critics as an elite class due to the distinction of labor, is perhaps too tempting in the pursuit of "Theory" and has led Said to consider abandoning the term as such. In response to a question about whether he would abandon the use of the term theory he says, "Yes I would. I just feel that's a guild designation now that has produced a jargon I find hopelessly tiresome."¹⁷ In addition to being an expression of the division of labor, Theory, as an abstract language, has a particular vehemence in America without a "settled political tradition" of the left.¹⁸ To a degree, then, the "extra-worldly, private,

¹⁶ Jennifer Wicke and Michael Sprinker "Criticism and the Art of Politics," in *Power, Politics, and Culture*, 141f. To be completely fair to Chomsky and Jameson, I should note that Said follows these remarks with the suggestion that both thinkers would be "open to solicitations from the political world" and that his remarks about them are perhaps "too critical."

¹⁷ Jennifer Wicke and Michael Sprinker "Criticism and the Art of Politics," 147.

¹⁸ Bruce Robbins "American Intellectuals and Middle East Politics," in *Power, Politics, and Culture*, 336. In this sense he distinguishes his argument from that forwarded by Lotringer and Cohen who critique theory as a malformation or mistranslation of *pensee* from the French into the American political context. See Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen "Introduction: A Few Theses on French Theory

in America," in Sylvère Lotringer and Sande Cohen *French Theory in America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1-10.

ethereal"¹⁹ language of theory does not speak, except within a limited milieu, for the most part other theorists, to an audience or constituency capable of effecting social transformation.

With no mass tradition of the left in the United States, or rather with the incorporation of those who would be the constituencies of the left into institutions supporting a larger Americanist narrative of a dialectic of unfolding freedom, the language of theory becomes a communication among specialists and, more importantly, cultivates a blindness to the "actual *affiliations* that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force, on the other."²⁰ To focus attention on the lack of a national audience outside of theorists and graduate students is to possibly overlook the influence of Althusser's critique of "spontaneous philosophy" on Said's critique of theory as a hermetic discourse.²¹ Spontaneous philosophy, for Althusser, is the development of a discourse dominated and limited by the "actual affiliations" previously mentioned. The question is not whether or not the guild constitutes a class, a class, no doubt, part of a larger class, but whether or not its Theory can transgress the ideas constituted through and limited by the affiliations of its segment of class society. This is not to suggest, moreover, that theorists are in need of a *more sophisticated* Theory, heaven forbid, but that Theory has yet to appreciate the full implications of its complex location in American society. Said indicates that this is, of course, an ironic situation because many trends within criticism, Marxism, to be sure, but also New Criticism and Structuralism, had their beginnings in a kind of populism.²² Said mentions Barthes' "abusive attacks" on Raymond Picard as motivated by a desire to "create new readers of the classics who might have otherwise been frightened off by their lack of professional literary accreditation."²³ Said believed that the "tendency toward formalism" both in New Criticism and Structuralism "was accentuated by the academy" to such a degree that Theory exists merely as the purified language of a tribe of three

¹⁹ Said uses these three terms to describe the context opposed by worldliness. See Bruce Robbins "American Intellectuals and Middle East Politics," 335.

²⁰ Edward Said "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 119, his emphasis.

²¹ See Louis Althusser "Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists," in Louis Althusser *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, ed. Gregory Elliot, trans. Ben Brewster et al. (New York and London: Verso, 1990), 69-166; Louis Althusser "Theory, Theoretical Practice and Theoretical Formation: Ideology and Ideological Struggle," in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, 1-42; Louis Althusser "The Transformation of Philosophy," in *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*, 241-265; and, Louis Althusser "The Historical Task of Marxist Philosophy," in Louis Althusser *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, ed. François Matheron, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York and London: Verso, 2003), 155-220.

²² Said "Opponents," 122-124.

²³ Said "Opponents," 123.

thousand critics and their acolytes.²⁴ At a certain point, of course, one would have to ask if the author of *Beginnings*, not an impossible text to be sure but certainly a text as difficult as, say, *L'écriture et la différence* or *Lecture Matérialiste de l'Évangile de Marc*, appreciates the irony of such statements. Said, as much as anyone, recognizes the dual aspect of the academy; it is a relatively safe haven for intellectual pursuits but is at the same time beholden to affiliations that many intellectuals would rather forget. We should not forget that one of the main currents within Said's work is a reflection on the place and obligation of the intellectual in society. From "Intellectuals in the Post-Colonial World" and "Third-World Intellectuals and Metropolitan Culture" to *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said's foremost concern is to move discourse beyond a handful of initiates in order to address different audiences and constituencies. It is just this attention to the need for an expressive, as opposed to hermetic, discourse that seems to be the genesis for the division Said's readers make in his writing. Said's rejoinder would be that a text has multiple audiences and constituencies and to delimit a text to a handful of likeminded or oppositional initiates merely serves to perpetuate the futility of theory in its vain search for agency. He writes, "I think it has to be supposed that many arguments can be made to more than one audience and in different situations. Otherwise we would be dealing not with an intellectual argument but either with dogma or with a technological jargon designed specifically to repel all but a small handful of initiates or coteries."²⁵

It is in response to the hermetic discourse of the initiates, I suggest, that Said has developed, after *Beginnings*, a style of discourse that is at the same time accessible and theoretically astute. I am referring not only to books like *Covering Islam* and articles like "Thoughts About America" but *Culture and Imperialism* and the essays he has written over the last three decades, many collected in *Reflections on Exile*, that, although concerning topics as diverse as Nietzsche, Conrad, Foucault, and Orwell are not unfriendly to the reader. This is not to suggest that such work has found a much wider audience than many of the more theoretically armored texts available to the reading public. Think, for example, of the fate of *Covering Islam*. As a study in ideology production, it was relatively widely read, widely read, that is, for a book by a literature professor at Columbia University, somewhat controversial, and few people could call into question the basic premise of *Covering Islam*; i.e., that the homogenization of Arab culture and the wider cultures of Islam was largely a product of the American media. Nevertheless, the book has largely failed to counteract the perceptions of Islam as a monolithic faith and American intervention in the Middle East as benevolent. Said would remark after the Gulf War, for example, that he thought the situation he addressed in *Covering Islam* had actually gotten worse: "Islam in the West is the last acceptable racial and cultural stereotype that you can fling about without

²⁴ Said "Opponents," 124.

²⁵ Edward Said "The Politics of Knowledge," in *Reflections on Exile*, 376.

any sense of bad manners or trepidation.”²⁶ Genealogically, however, it is possible to see the influence of the questions raised by Said in *Covering Islam*, and elsewhere, influencing the work of thinkers like Tariq Ali whose *The Clash of Fundamentalisms* presents Islam outside the confines of the Arab world in a manner that would be astounding to the consumers of American media. Nevertheless, the audience for a more astute reading of politics is simply unavailable in the world of the 24-hour news cycle, talk radio, etc. There is simply too little time to spend on the latest celebrity crime to bother with the complexity of the histories, cultures, and civilizations of people who are considered enemies. Even as the Administration warns of lumping all Muslims together, and the news media tells us that terrorists do not speak for “genuine” Islam, there is a dearth of analysis made available to the public at large by the Administration or the news media concerning the very real complexity of Islam, the Arab world, terrorism, the economic and political histories of the Middle East and Asia and current political issues of the Middle East and Asia.

At the same time, however, there is an ongoing struggle within the academy about the political responsibility of the scholar. Shortly after the events of September 11, 2001 a group of scholars, supported by a conservative think tank, authored “What We Are Fighting For: A Letter from America,”²⁷ a treatise justifying military action in Afghanistan based principally on Jean Bethke Elshtain’s construal of the just war doctrine. In his article, “Thoughts About America” Said takes Elshtain et al. to task for avoiding mentioning details concerning what they refer to as the contravention of “American values,” because recourse to historical, political and economic realities of American involvement in the worlds of Islam would give lie to the notion that terrorism is simply the result of a “clash of civilizations” as it is portrayed by the Bush Administration, “experts” on terrorism procured by the news media and, of course, the “Letter From America.” Said is quite specific when calling attention to the detriments of the letter: “While it pretends to the elucidation of principles and the declaration of values, it is in fact exactly the opposite, an exercise in not knowing, in blinding readers with a patriotic rhetoric that encourages ignorance as it overrides real politics, real history, and real moral issues.”²⁸ In a certain sense, the critique of “Letter From America” is not dissimilar from the critique of Theory; i.e., both the letter and Theory are effective to the extent that they avoid as much as possible the social location of their topics and the institutional affiliations making them possible. By excising its social location the “Letter from America” inverts the ideals expressed in “The Representations of the

²⁶ Eleanor Wachtel “Edward Said: Between Two Cultures,” in *Power, Politics, and Culture*, 239.

²⁷ Jean Bethke Elshtain, David Blankenhorn, James Q. Wilson, Mary Ann Glendon, et al. “What We Are Fighting For: A Letter From America.” <http://www.americanvalues.org/html/wwff.html> (February, 2002).

²⁸ Edward Said “Thoughts About America.” <http://www.counterpunch.org/saidamerica.html> (March 2002).

Colonized”²⁹ citing thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Talal Asad for whom the voices of the oppressed are paramount and recuperates justifications of colonialism long called into question, for example, in *Culture and Imperialism*, and uses them as a justification for a war in Afghanistan. Of course, as Said has spent much of his career emphasizing, opposing documents like the “letter From America” is not an endorsement of terrorism. It is, rather, an attempt to see beyond the narrow scope of writers from Huntington to Elshtain et al. for whom the resounding clash of civilizations drowns out the voices of those who resist empire. This phrase “the clash of civilizations” is the title of an article by Samuel Huntington that was a response to Francis Fukuyama’s ruminations about “the end of history.” The last essay of *Reflections on Exile* takes Huntington to task for what we could call the creation of logic, or illogic as the case may be, proper to a new cold war. Although Huntington’s article has had dire repercussions since September 11, 2001, Said rightly compares “The Clash of Civilizations?” to H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* insofar as each represents conflict as a result of self-enclosed worlds.³⁰

The worlds we live in, however, are not self-enclosed and in the work of Edward Said lines of interaction are always brought to the forefront. As an exile, Edward Said claimed to have existed between many worlds. For him this was not a source of tragedy but an opportunity for a truly cosmopolitan future. One vision of this future may be culled from the remembrance of Said by Daniel Barenbaum: addressing a room of music students (Arabs, Germans, and Israelis), Said reminded them of Weimar, city of Goethe and Buchenwald and “did so in a way that did not offend the Israelis, did not distribute collective guilt to the Germans and made the Arabs see the necessity of understanding that period in Jewish history.”³¹ He brought the very heterogeneous history of Weimar to students in a manner that justified neither guilt nor victimization but in a manner, as in all of his writing, that makes solidarity among divergent peoples possible. This, finally, is Edward Said’s *poeisis*.

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²⁹ See Edward Said “Representing the Colonized: Anthropology’s Interlocutors,” in *Reflections on Exile*, 293-316

³⁰. See Edward Said “The Clash of Definitions,” in *Reflections on Exile*, 575.

³¹ Daniel Barenbaum “Edward Said; An Appreciation.”

<http://www.time.com/time/europe/magazine/article/0,13005,901031006-490772,00.html> (October, 2003).

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Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory 5.1 (December 2003)