



Edward Said (1935–2003)

A Late Style of Humanism

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Why did Edward Said — uniquely among literary academics — command so wide an audience? First, he was *the* minority voice in the West for Palestine in the conflict with Israel.

1 Edward Said, 'Always on Top', *London Review of Books*, 25, 6 (20 Mar. 2003), 3–6 (3); see also Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire; Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London and New York, 1995), 159–66; 'The Intellectual in the Post-Colonial World; Response and Discussion' [Panelists: Conor Cruise O'Brien, Edward Said, John Lukács] *Salmagundi*, 70–71 (Spring–Summer 1986), 65–81.

Second, his book *Orientalism* (1978) unforgettably revealed how important it was to know and further discover how the 'East' (Near East, Middle East, Far East, the Orient) had been created and observed under the supervision of Western eyes that always saw in it a counter-image and confirmation of what they saw themselves to be. In a wider perspective, Said also demonstrated in this book that the very act of the apprehension of the Other as an object for study is itself a model of the kinked relationship between rationality and domination so fatal to whatever or whoever the West considers to be beyond the pale cast of its thought. Third, because of his own involvement in these Easts and Wests, Said made the writing of literary criticism and political commentary an ethically urgent, inescapably political and complex activity. He was indeed a *chef d'école*, but postcolonialism — along with the swarms of those who deride it as a phantom and of those who welcome it as a revelation — is not at the centre of his work, although it obviously lies close to it. He thought that what he called postcolonial criticism, which began under the spiritual aegis of Fanon and Césaire, had the great virtue of showing the intertwined histories of colonizer and colonized, although without ever ignoring the realities that separated them. But since the end of the Vietnam War, and the subsequent proliferation of apologies for imperialism, postcolonialism has discovered

that its very name is premature; at its weakest, it is the intellectually delayed Western response to the decolonization process of the 1960s in what is now called the 'Third World'; at its strongest, it has continued to take the lead from Said, then Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, in its examination of the discursive operations of colonialism. Said, since the late 1970s, remained alert to the workings of present-day imperialism and to the complicity of writers of all kinds — Gérard Chaliand, Conor Cruise O'Brien, V. S. Naipaul — in cleansing its record and defending its practices by their ready adaptation of the inherited discourses which he so memorably illuminated.¹

Paradoxically, what made Said a leading exponent of postcolonialism, was his vexed, yet loyal adherence to the humanist tradition in which he had been educated and by the limitations of which he so often was dismayed. While he saw, along with many others, that the historical conditions for humanism had almost disappeared in the twentieth century — particularly with the rise of Fascism — he still sought to create conditions for the survival of some of its deepest values. Even a hostile commentator on Said, such as Aijaz Ahmad, who considers the material conditions of Said's position as a Western intellectual to expose the 'idealism' of his intellectual stance, says (erroneously) that 'the

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systematic awareness of the role of literature in imperialist ideology' had not been in the communist tradition before the anti-war movements of the late sixties and Said's *Orientalism*.² Yet Said's battles were not merely a reprise of those Adorno had fought earlier — against Fascism, Stalinism, late Capitalism, the Luciferian fall of the aesthetic into the abyss of popular culture and consumerism. *Orientalism* is the most influential late modern account of the various histories of collusion between military coercion, commercial greed, scholarship and the astonishing intellectual work involved in the creation of a global system that has been in the making for well over two hundred years. It liberates and entraps Said as a writer. It illuminates a predicament in which an accelerating logic of domination and control is realized by humans who are themselves commanded by it. This is not to say that Said leaves us in any doubt that it is those who are dominated who are by far the more damaged by subjection, whatever corruption may attend upon it for its practitioners, at least some of whom are as anxious to persuade themselves as they are to convince others of the beneficial and unavoidable nature of their massacres, annexations, misrepresentations and thefts. But Said wants to find the space for and confidence in an emancipatory project of the kind offered by the great eighteenth-century Italian philosopher, Vico, who imagined a secular and humane world as the ultimate historical creation of humankind. This faith was constantly challenged for Said by the often reluctantly admitted force of Foucault's thought, in which that emancipatory possibility seemed to him to have been dimmed or extinguished. The battle is visible in his own work. *Orientalism* is Foucauldian; many of the later essays in which he — more effectively than most of his critics — laid siege to his own garrisoned achievement, are Viconian in inspiration. Said fought a battle, related to but distinct from Adorno's, not against

the destruction of humanism as such, but against the damaged and ghastly afterlife it continued to lead in American foreign policy and in its most murderous variant, the destruction of the Palestinians by the Israelis in the name of 'Western' values. The Zionist project was born-again Fascism, a more enduring enemy than its first form, of which it was an inversion.

György Lukács, the Hungarian Marxist (and later Stalinist) critic made it a commonplace of European cultural belief that the central art-form of humanism was the novel, 'the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God', the most famous sentence of a description of the form which Said described as 'certainly the most brilliant ever offered'.³ Lukács also went beyond Mazzini's work on the historical novel to make it the genre or sub-genre that most crucially and visibly bore the legible imprint of 'history'. In addition, he provided a dual theory of the evolution of the novel as a form, claiming it derived from the epic, and then, after a brilliant phase of development in the nineteenth century, culminated in the failure of the bourgeoisie in the European revolutions of 1848, falling thereafter into the 'novel of disillusionment', in which 'the incongruence of interiority and the conventional world leads to a complete denial of the latter'.⁴ Tolstoy revealed how much the novel 'is the necessary epic form of our time', because in him the unbridgeable gap between nature and culture was disclosed, how the best efforts of Tolstoy (or later Dostoyevsky) could not restore that pristine and harmonious condition.⁵ This is a prelude to the famous conclusion to Lukács's classic Cold War essay 'The Ideology of Modernism', with its attacks on Joyce, Musil, Benn, Kafka and others for their 'rejection of narrative objectivity, the surrender to subjectivity'; in effect, 'modernism leads not only to the destruction of traditional literary forms; it leads to the destruction of literature as

- 2 'Nationalism, Post-Colonialism, Communism', Aijaz Ahmad interviewed by Gregory Elliott, Francis Mulhern and Peter Osborne, *Radical Philosophy*, 76 (Mar.–Apr. 1996), 29–38 (29–30)
- 3 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 560
- 4 Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (London, 1971), 144; first published in German in 1920.
- 5 *Theory of the Novel*, 146

- 6 *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John Mander and Necke Mander (London, 1963), 24, 45; probably composed in 1955.
- 7 *Contemporary Realism*, 15–16; see also a more detailed, if not more convincing, temporal sequence for the development of the novel in the 1935 essay, ‘Il romanzo come epopea borghese’, translated into Italian in 1976 in *Problemi di Teoria del Romanzo*, ed. Vittorio Strada (Torino, 1976), 133–78. Adorno’s view of Lukács’s aesthetics, and especially of his faith in the bourgeois novel’s ‘realism’ is fierce, although Fredric Jameson sees the problem of ‘realism’ in Lukács’s work more clearly. See Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics*, with Afterword by Fredric Jameson (London, 1977), 151–76, 199–204.
- 8 See Said’s essays ‘Between Chance and Determinism: Lukács’s *Aesthetik*’; ‘History, Literature, and Geography’; ‘Traveling Theory Reconsidered’, in *Reflections on Exile*, 61–69, 436–52, 458–63. See also Abdirahman A. Hussein, *Edward Said: Criticism and Society* (London and New York, 2002), 216–23, for a splendid account of Said and Lukács.
- 9 *Contemporary Realism* in the essay ‘Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann’, 47

such’.⁶ Throughout, Lukács is defending a particular notion of ‘realism’, with Thomas Mann as his exemplary practitioner, in which the fine but necessary balance between nature and culture is struck, although it is always at risk. For Lukács, realism is the antithesis of modernism because it is founded on ‘a common social attitude’, always historically specifiable in the particular shape that it takes, which for him then was the expression of a human solidarity through the ‘humanist revolt against imperialism’ and against Cold War ideology.⁷ This Lukácsian faith in the durability of the great literary novel as an expression of human solidarity and the accompanying suspicion of the dazzling melancholia of modernism and its alienated interiorities remains part of the heritage of American literary criticism in general, even as one of its allergies, and, more specifically, of Theodor Adorno (who is part of that heritage), of Fredric Jameson and of Edward Said.

Many American intellectuals of the twentieth century were deeply indebted to Marxism, which in the 1930s especially had offered the most effective analysis of the contemporary triumphs of Fascism and failures of Capitalism. Said recognized the debt he owed to Lukács’s work, especially *Soul and Form* (1910), *The Theory of the Novel* (1920), *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), and *The Historical Novel* (1947); *Studies in European Realism* (1948) and *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957) had less impact. He first incurred it indirectly through the influence Lukács had exerted on Kenneth Burke and R. P. Blackmur in particular.⁸ It was from Lukács that he learned how to see the affiliative connections between exile, alienation and linguistic displacement in the early modernists; in short, Lukács helped him to read Conrad. But as the prestige of Lukács — and of his disciple, Lucien Goldmann — waned and as the New Criticism became the aesthetic weapon of

choice during the Cold War, a specific American version of militant humanism began to intensify into the chronically inflamed condition that still endures. It then became doctrinal to see the Russian Revolution as a replay of the French Revolution and to say that revolutionary, utopian and atheistic visions of global transformation lacked the precious sense of human complexity and unpredictability that the liberal, Western (Anglo-American), anti-revolutionary and Christian cultures displayed in their economic, political and artistic achievements, all of which were monuments to the spirit of the individual rather than that of the collective. It was in that setting — scarcely altered in the last fifty years — that Said’s *Orientalism* appeared to be so scandalous to the captains of Western propaganda. For it showed how doctrinally bound the West was; how given to creating cartoon enemies for the purpose of imaging its true self; and how clearly its aim had been and still was world domination. One of the most unnoticed features of the book is how closely its themes are repeated in the pulp fiction (print and visual) of the era from the Cold War to the present — the cults of the abnormal, the perverse, the existence of the world-threatening Evil Enemy, the Other, and the tiresome but tireless variations on the older forms of detective and thriller fiction, of which Lukács observed in the mid-fifties:

Or take the detective story. With Conan Doyle the genre was firmly grounded in a philosophy of security; it glorified the omniscience of those who watched over the stability of bourgeois life. Now the basic ingredients are fear and insecurity: at any moment terror may break through; only luck can avert it.⁹

Said realized that the exposure of imperialism as a system in which culture was politics by other means — although he was not the first by any means to so expose

it — had serious, perhaps inescapable, consequences for humanistic study. He recognized that the production of such a system and of an analysis of it, such as his own, had the same source in rationality. Thus he raised a central question about enlightenment itself. If rationality is so given to domination is domination integral to it? Or is domination the sad road taken since the eighteenth-century Enlightenment originally gave to reason the crown formerly (and latterly) worn by all kinds of irrational or non-rational agencies? These were questions that Adorno, Horkheimer and others, standing in the afterlight of Fascism and Stalinism, had raised and attempted to answer. They had wanted to renew reason's alliance with emancipation. But it was Foucault who seemed to make that renewal impossible, because of his equation of knowledge with disciplinary power and because of his peculiarly seductive way of regarding the exercise of reason as a species of covert police operation that had only one purpose — to capture and intern all that it considered to share in a nature not its own. This position clearly informs Said's in *Orientalism*; and he adheres to it in the late seventies, sufficiently so to make his intervention in the Foucault–Derrida debate seem decisive for his subsequent career. What I want to suggest is that for Said to side with Foucault in 1978 was perfectly coherent with the vision of his great book *Orientalism*.¹⁰ For Said the postcolonial critic, Foucault was right, and he saw that; for Said the humanist, Derrida was right, but he did not see that. Derrida's 1963 lecture-review 'Cogito and the History of Madness' of Foucault's *Folie et Déraison* strikes at the central weakness of Foucault's work, 'writing a history of untamed madness ... before being caught and paralyzed in the nets of classical reason, from within the very language of classical reason itself'.¹¹ Said could not abide by Foucault's position and remain a defender of humanism; he could have found support

for his humanism, however elusive it might have proved to be, in Derrida. To clarify his position for himself and for some others, he dismissed both as authors whose effect was to depoliticize writing and even to trivialize it to a game in which 'undecidability' was always the trump card. This was unfair, but effective. Postmodernism and deconstruction were both flushed out of the system and Said, besieged by Zionists, imperialists, and their fellow travellers in the media and the academy, turned to defend his book on the same humanistic grounds that they in turn claimed to be protecting. Anyway, no theoretical misgivings could rob *Orientalism* of its force in relation to US policies in the Middle East — Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq — and their dependence on the 'three sets of illusions [that] economically buttress and reproduce each other in the interests of shoring up the Western self-image: the view of Islam, the ideology of modernization, and the affirmations of Zionism.'¹² Moreover, its analysis of the essentially anthropological position of detachment adopted towards strange and threatening ethnic groups gains in power with every intensification of the tsunami of the propaganda 'war on terror' that rampages through the Islamic countries targeted by it.¹³

Said's defence of Western humanism, rather than of the 'anti-humanism' of Foucault and others, does not now seem as surprising as it might have done in the early 1980s. Said was always an American intellectual, although more than usually alert to the differences and interconnections between modern American, European and Arab traditions of commentary and analysis. At Princeton and Harvard 'he had the privilege to be trained in the German philological tradition of comparative literature'.¹⁴ He was also a university teacher and an admirer of the university as an ideal and as a place. His friend and colleague Michael Wood remembered, in a tribute to him after his death, that

10 'The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions', *Critical Inquiry*, 4, 4 (1978), 673–714

11 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London, 1978), 31–63 (34); see also Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London, 1987), 213–23.

12 'The Formation of American Public Opinion on the Question of Palestine', in *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969–1994* (London, 1994), 61–62

13 'Identity, Negation and Violence', in *The Politics of Dispossession*, 345–49

14 Cited in Tariq Ali, 'Remembering Edward Said 1935–2003', *New Left Review*, 24 (Nov.–Dec. 2003), 59–65 (60)

- 15 Michael Wood, 'On Edward Said', *London Review of Books*, 25, 20 (23 Oct. 2003), 3
- 16 Edward Said, *Musical Elaborations* (London, 1991), 95, 93
- 17 'Sense and Sensibility', in *Reflections on Exile*, 15–23

... he was as anxious to save cultural spaces from politics as he was to remind us that most people who say culture should be free of politics mean only that culture should be free of the politics they dislike. I was always moved by Edward's repeated (and I think romanticized) claim that the American university is 'the last remaining utopia', and his books are full of tributes and references and acknowledgments to a vast assortment of scholars, a sort of textual community of inquiry.¹⁵

I too remember that Edward was pleased to be shown Cardinal Newman's highly orientalist (although ecumenically inspired) University Church in Stephen's Green in Dublin, largely because of his admiration for Newman's 'Idea of a University' and also because of the conjunction, commemorated in a plaque on the adjoining Newman House, of the most famous names associated with it — Newman, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Joyce. That trio represented the kind of internal dissonance only a university, among all institutions, would seek to generate and celebrate. Although he did not to my knowledge write of Newman, they shared a faith in the communal yet lonely life of the intellectual in the university. In Newman's style, so famously saluted by Joyce, there is a timbre, redolent both of solitude and communion, that Said himself time and again achieved, so much so that it might be taken to be his 'authorial signature', the *air de la chanson* as Proust put it, or, in Said's own comment on the Proustian passage, 'the ultimately solitary intimacy by which the special music of an author impresses itself upon a receptive critical intelligence.'¹⁶

So it was ultimately on a particular version of the Ivy League university tradition that Said drew most deeply, particularly as that had developed at Columbia, with F. W. Dupee, R. P. Blackmur and, to a lesser extent, Lionel Trilling and, later, Richard

Poirier. There were various extensions of this, most notably in the so-called Geneva School of critical phenomenology, dominated by the work of Georges Poulet and Jean Starobinski. But their Geneva was a suburb of Columbia, Harvard and Princeton, which had themselves become cosmopolitan under the influence of German philological scholarship. Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, a work that became more emblematic for Said as time went by, was regarded as its masterwork. His *Orientalism* was a companionate achievement. In both, a whole tradition of writing and scholarship was summarized with a force that suddenly gave to an amorphous 'field' a cartographic reality that endowed it with a degree of definition by which its occupants would be forever stimulated, even if only at times — and vainly — to escape. In both cases, the authors were, like their readers, beneficiaries and casualties of the fame and completeness of these works, besieged by adulation and animosity.

What Said found in the writings of Blackmur, Poulet and others was the capacity of such critics to immerse themselves in the texts under scrutiny and yet to be able, perhaps even via such immersion, to gain a perspective on and detachment from them.¹⁷ This was for him the essence of the idea of critical distance which he believed the intellectual needed to achieve; it was also the source of his own search for those critical terms that would accelerate his capacity to mould the perceptual into the conceptual in relation to an ensemble of works, textual or musical. The terms 'filiation' and 'affiliation' are instances of this. 'Filiation' is, so to say, a natural condition, the one into which a person is born. 'Affiliation' is a cultural condition, one into which that person might develop. This is not a simple progress from a singular to a plural condition. The words operate energetically in relation to one another. Yet there is also within these terms

an observance of limitation. What is given, the filiate, is given by a specific set of circumstances and possibilities; so too is the affiliate controlled by the opportunities, internal and external, in which it can develop. A well-known example is Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's fiction. Someone dominated by those 'nets' he wants so urgently and famously to fly beyond, he grows beyond his origins to an extraordinary degree and yet his growth is marked by those origins, as is the heretic by the beliefs he repudiates. Indeed the more refined and supple the heresy, the more embedded the filiate conditions that promoted it. Yet the filiate is not altogether a destiny. For the affiliate condition is not capricious or a form of boosterism — 'you can be what you want to be' — or of any of the similar popular slogans that rotate endlessly on their commercial axes. It always has an element of retroactive recognition; this — and it need not be anything 'fulfilling' — is what lay dormant in a person, a generation, an historical epoch. Stephen Dedalus is one incarnation of this; but so too is Julien Sorel awaiting execution, both of them little Napoleons. Said is uneasy with the trouble he finds in these terms, although Blackmur surely taught him about the rewards of the punitive aspects of appreciation and thinking. Only great art has this capacity for making great trouble and enchantment arrive together, like dormant possibilities that can only awake, if they do, simultaneously. So it is only in speaking of art that, as is proper, his critical terms are stretched to the limit.

Said constantly returned to the novel to understand its particular mode of creating values by the most severe and exquisite testing of the possibility of people ever having or of ever developing the resource to live by the relatively few and basic principles they could conceive or imagine. Joseph Conrad was the most important of all novelists for him in this regard. His first

book (originally his doctoral dissertation) was on Conrad; some of the finest pages in his next book *Beginnings* dwell on Conrad's example and on his great novel *Nostromo*; and Conrad never moved out of his range of regular reference thereafter. The initial attraction is easy to understand, although it ultimately develops into a very difficult relationship. They were both from countries — Poland and Palestine — subject to massacre, the bloodstain from which had been regularly rinsed away in the detergent waters of global politics; each belonged to the presiding imperial power and culture of his time — respectively Britain and the US; each had produced an outstanding critique of imperialism; each had made the condition of exile prototypical of modernity and its various forms of domination and alienation; each was culturally attached to the politically scandalous systems he analysed and to which he was not entirely native.

It is to Conrad's novels that we must go to find the besetting image that corresponds to his presence within Said's writings — that of the informing ghost, the secret sharer, the sinister intimate who is a companion to the hero on his crusade to discover the grounds for a rational faith in human action or, alternatively, to face up to the usual polysyllabic Conradian fate of looking into the incomprehensible, or yielding to the suction of the fathomless whirlpool of unbelief that, for Conrad, had its political correlative in Russian anarchism — his version of what is now called Terror. In Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907) as in *Under Western Eyes* (1911) — both titles have a strong Saidian flavour — the terrorist is no military threat to the empires (British and Russian) he lives in. He threatens instead to expose the illusions by which they (or any organizations, including the conspiratorial kind) bonded themselves together — the illusion that their forms of solidarity had a foundation in the real. This attracts Said's attention, but not because he agreed with the notion that imperial and/or

18 Joseph Conrad and Ford Madox Hueffer, *Romance, A Novel* (London, 1903), 462

human solidarity have no such foundation. Instead, he wanted to argue that such a solidarity does indeed exist, but that it can survive only in the specifically human, not the imperial, form. What makes an empire frail is that the reality of human solidarity is anti-imperial. Empire, as a system or as an idea, betrays human solidarity; human solidarity, as an idea or as a system, threatens empire.

Said recognized but did not endorse the abyssal possibility that Conrad regularly insinuates. Nor was he receptive to the contrastingly grandiose sentimentality that Conrad occasionally intones, as in an early collaborative effort like *Romance* (1903), where he tells us that ‘suffering is the lot of man’ but bears within it ‘a hope of felicity, like a jewel set in iron’.¹⁸ Still, this strain in Conrad, with which he hoped to win a popular audience, is an important, if unsuccessful, counter to the bleaker vision that he more convincingly establishes in his best work. Said empathized with this struggle, noting that the anguish and physical ailments Conrad complained of were perhaps bound up with the impasse that he confronted almost daily when he wrote. Was the act of writing itself an exposure of an abiding nullity in all experience or, as an act, did it sanction a hope that pure reflection on existence never could? Moreover, Conrad’s anxieties about money and artistic integrity did not simply rehearse the modernist anxiety to pretend that art was somehow excluded from the zone of commercial exploitation. They were anxieties, that Said also shared, about the possibility of reaching an audience in a language that would avoid the contrasting fates of ultra-refinement or of journalistic debasement. It was only with the publication of Said’s memoir *Out of Place* (1999) that the resemblance with his own condition became clear; for Said too found himself plagued by a similar tension, parental in origin, between the appeal of the harsh disciplines of work and the

ravishments of aesthetic pleasure. Through one, he was an Arab who could become an American; through the other, he was an American who could again become an Arab. Yet it was in a fusion of both appeals that he founded his humanist faith in a form of solidarity that escaped the notional and national binaries that moulded his upbringing in those Eastern-Western worlds of Palestine, Libya, Egypt and the US.

His humanism refused both sentimentality and negation; Conrad’s disquieting attempts to transmute the sense of human endeavour’s emptiness into the affirmations required by the mass audience led to his endorsement of the British imperial adventure, which, in its propaganda, assigned to such sentiment a salient role. Said, by contrast, wanted to establish the existence of a human solidarity that rejected all forms of world domination, especially the British or American kinds, that claim universality for their provincial and cynically sentimental versions of ‘freedom’, ‘democracy’, ‘way-of-life’. These claims were dangerous because they were so close to the truths they perverted. They came from cultures that, to justify their attempts at domination abroad, had distorted the central tenets of the humanist tradition that had been developed at home. They displayed greater expertise in this regard than those fated to be humanism’s enemies (as, for instance, Conrad thought Russia was). Perversion of principle, achieved on such a scale and with such success, came from intimacy with principle, not from ignorance of it. It is no wonder that *Nostromo* was the Conrad novel Said explored in the most searching and illuminating detail.

Perhaps this feature of Said’s work also helped him to win a wide readership. His humanism had and has an appeal beyond the walls of the academy. Many would say that it had greater appeal outside than within those walls, because it has long been

a belief, promoted by the popular media, that humanism had been destroyed by the academy's bulimic passion for the junk food of 'Theory', especially sinister because the plain beef-and-beer diet of the Anglo-American menu had been dismissed by a French cuisine. Although such an attitude completely deforms any understanding of Said, whose contempt for the Allan Bloom–Saul Bellow–Harold Bloom version of the intellectual life was always clear, it has merit for those who admire his brilliant, essayistic style in which the needs of the educated, rather than the specialized, audience were rarely forgotten. His work is free of the numb vocabularies and anti-humanist declarations that allegedly characterized the largely-unread but widely-caricatured work of authors such as Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari — to name only a short list of the demonic practitioners. Said's position on the question of good and bad writing 'is simply to avoid jargon that only alienates a potentially wide constituency'.¹⁹ Yet, for all that, Said never quite came to grips with the philosophical/stylistic problem of the esoteric in writing, represented by influential modern thinkers as diverse as Adorno or Leo Strauss. It is not at all enough to argue the case by identifying the esoteric elements in a discourse as 'jargon', or to say that writers such as these are exceptions, who may be allowed to be cryptic or obscure, because they are so extraordinarily gifted. This is the kind of stalwart defence of humanism that reveals the internal intellectual strain it must undergo to escape what he calls 'the impoverishing dichotomy' between jargon and 'a nostalgic celebration of some past state of glory associated with what is sentimentally evoked as humanism'.²⁰

Said seems to be in agreement with Adorno on the crucial question of the status of the aesthetic in relation to the historical, political or any other form of production. Both say it is different; the only realm

resistant to commodification, according to Adorno *because* it has found in the esoteric a resistance and resource against absorption. Said too asserts 'that there is always the supervening reality of the aesthetic work without which the kind of humanism I am talking about here really has no essential meaning, only an instrumental one'. But when Said then goes on to invoke the authority of the great classical humanist critics of modernity — Leo Spitzer, Erich Auerbach, Ernst Robert Curtius — for a particular kind of close reading and reception that is based 'only in the inner faith of the humanist "in the power bestowed on the human mind of investigating the human mind" [the quotation is from Spitzer], as well as an abiding sense that what one finds in the work is generally worth investigating', the chasm separating his view from Adorno's is revealed.²¹ Most immediately, we can see that Said's defence of the plain style and Adorno's defence of the cryptic or esoteric are founded in completely different views of the aesthetic. While both regard it as uniquely important and different from other categories, for Adorno the shrunken audience for the aesthetic is a tragic indication of the unavoidable power of Capitalism's colonization of almost all intellectual as well as geographical space. The fate of the aesthetic, revealed in its esoteric modern or modernist forms, is part of the logic of Capitalism. For Said, the aesthetic can be acknowledged through extreme care and conscientiousness, but it is in effect, as a category, emancipated from the logic of Capitalism because, he argued, the aesthetic can never be reduced to or be identical with the historical conditions that produce it. For Said the great modernist novel was *Nostromo*, in which 'material interests', as represented by the silver of the mines, swallow everything individual into an impersonal system of power; for Adorno, the great modern novel was Mann's *Doctor Faustus* (1947), in which the musical genius Leverkühn articulates through his art an

- 19 *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York, 2004), 72
 20 *Humanism*, 70
 21 *Humanism*, 64–65

- 22 See George Lichtheim, *Lukács* (London, 1970), 84–92; James Schmidt, ‘Mephistopheles in Hollywood: Adorno, Mann and Schoenberg’, in Tom Huhn, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge, 2004), 148–80; Michael Maar, ‘Teddy and Tommy: The Masks of *Doctor Faustus*’, *New Left Review*, 20 (Mar.–Apr. 2003), 113–30.
- 23 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London, 1974), 89; first published in German in 1951.
- 24 *Minima Moralia*, 222. See also James Schmidt, ‘Mephistopheles in Hollywood’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, 168.
- 25 Ara Guzelimian, ed., *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society* (New York, 2002), 79–110, 169–84
- 26 *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York, 1994), 82
- 27 Edward Said, ‘My Encounter with Sartre’, *London Review of Books*, 22, 11 (1 Jun. 2000), 42–43
- 28 ‘Edward Said in Conversation with Neeladri Bhattacharya, Suvir Kaul and Ania Loomba, New Delhi, 16 December, 1997’, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 1, 1 (Oct. 1998), 81–96 (94)
- authoritarian politics that was latent within the humanist tradition that it destroyed. (It should be noted, however, that both Lukács and Adorno were victims of self-delusion about Mann’s attitude towards them and towards the history of humanism in Germany, especially as it is represented in *Doctor Faustus*.)²² The barbarity of the modern era is created in politics; but its rupture with the past is, on closer inspection, an outgrowth of what was already there. Because of the connivance between culture and politics — a central theme in *Orientalism* — the depths of such unwelcome continuities can be plumbed more effectively in art than in or by any other activity. Said in part agrees with this; his recognition of the presence, within Jane Austen’s novels, of the slave trade’s sustaining a whole economy of leisure would be one instance. Yet he did not go as far as Adorno in 1945, stricken by how Fascism had gained support for its programmes of extermination against the Jews, in saying that, ‘In the innermost recesses of humanism, as its very soul, there rages a frantic prisoner who, as a Fascist, turns the world into a prison.’²³ Adorno believed that art was possible without humanism and further, that the moment of humanism’s extinction had been illuminated in the blaze of an art which lit up the landscape of barbarism of the war period and of the post-war period, and not just in Germany. But there was always the appeal of art to beauty and pleasure, even when it was representing mass slaughter (say in Schoenberg’s composition *A Survivor from Warsaw*, which shares a birth date with *Doctor Faustus* and the great Adorno/Horkheimer polemic *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). ‘Art is magic delivered from the lie of being truth.’²⁴ Said could not have gone so far; his belief in the conditioning existence of humanism left him instead with the older and vexing questions of the relation of art to the artist’s opinions, one that he and Daniel Barenboim debated in relation to Wagner’s anti-Semitism and his

music, with all its accompanying history from Wagner’s day to the present.²⁵ In the end, on the old premises, one has to say that the opinions do and do not matter; that they must and must not be taken into account in the consideration of the work as art. This may be a dialectic; but it looks more like a game of shuttlecock.

Nevertheless, despite the severe strains involved in remaining loyal to the fundamental values of the academy, Said could still aver in the 1993 Reith lectures for the BBC that ‘To my mind, the Western university, certainly in America, still can offer the intellectual a quasi-utopian space in which reflection and research can go on, albeit under new constraints and pressures.’²⁶ His challenges to propaganda, commodification and inhumanity were the more effective because they were of such a classically ‘intellectual’ kind, commonly linked with a figure like Sartre in France, or Raymond Williams in England. They had both been at times dismissively indulged because they were Marxists — although Sartre’s opposition to the Algerian War provoked real and vicious responses, while it also made him the icon throughout the world of the engaged intellectual — like Zola before or Said after him. (Yet Sartre and his *cénacle* were Zionists and Said’s one meeting with him was an unpleasant experience.²⁷) Said often spoke of the need of the intellectual to keep a ‘critical distance’ from power while remaining engaged; when his Reith lectures were published under the title *Representations of the Intellectual*, there was a great stir when in the Arabic version ‘a word which means “not committed” in Arabic was substituted for the phrase “independent intellectual”, and I don’t mean it that way.’²⁸ Neither too far out, nor too in deep; not detached to an inhuman degree, not immersed to the point of blur — or complicity; this is a somewhat emaciated summary of his credo. But, although committed politically, he was so sturdy in his avowal of widely shared

humanist beliefs, that it took a concerted and polemical strategy of misreading and then of insult to misrepresent him as a sinister influence.

Said was no Marxist; nor was he a structuralist, post-structuralist, or deconstructionist; nor did he merit any of the other terms widely canvassed in the media as equivalents for ‘terrorist’. If he had a model for the engaged and frequently enraged intellectual, whose radical challenge to the corruption of traditional beliefs was sustained by the breathtaking stylistic balance he consistently struck, it was Jonathan Swift. Like Swift on Ireland or on early Capitalism, Said on Palestine showed that a humanist faith was scandalously betrayed by those who used the lexicon and the tones of civility to justify murder and exploitation. Israel was not and is not, he claimed, a country of the Western enlightenments; it has become the dark state that destroys those enlightenments by the nature of its claim to embody them. In that one battle between Palestine and Israel, Said revealed the depth and danger of the Western world’s investment in coercion and hypocrisy and the pressing need to dissolve that investment.

For his appeal to survive at all, his rhetoric had to have more savour than is usual in the decaffeinated world of the American academy in particular. He won friends because he wrote so well; equally, on that account, he attracted hostility from those who were sorry to see the case against them put so cogently. He seemed to be able to negotiate successfully between the alternatives of self-referential aestheticism, with its separation of art and criticism from social praxis, and what was once the almost mandatory modernist despair about the incapacity of language to represent the real. As we have seen, he was aware of and greatly influenced by the great power of the conceptual reconfigurations achieved by Derrida and, more so, Foucault. Yet for the

sake of vigour if not rigour he had to be decisive in his repudiation of their baneful contribution to what he called ‘the regulated, not to say calculated, irrelevance of criticism’.²⁹ Although his view of all the various moments of ‘theory’ was extremely conventional and far too readily dismissive, its forthrightness was part of his engaged and engaging style. All the strategic keywords in Said’s vocabulary — such as molestation, filiation, affiliation, worldliness, counterpoint — accentuate the secularity of his ambitions for criticism; both to be conscious of the particular world in which it was created and to know the specific historical nature and heritage of the materials, including the works of art, which it addressed. No epistemological relativism was allowed as an excuse for escaping from ethical judgement; no ethical judgement supervened over aesthetic appreciation. He created a conceptual tempo rather than a conceptual structure in his writing; his essays are Goldberg variations on a set of basic themes, ultimately astonishing in their virtuosity but also astonishing in their revelation of the intrinsic richness of the themes themselves. In later years, as the tonic climate of his earlier writings, clear and bracing, became more autumnal, Adorno’s influence returned to enrich and modify Said’s thinking. One sign of this was Said’s characteristically direct rejection of what he thought of as the Hegelian School’s habit or routine of reconciling oppositions in a larger synthesis; instead, he thought of his position as that of bearing witness, like Adorno, to irreconcilability, allowing opposed positions to be held in a dialectical tension that was not slackened by any wish to see them coalesce under the impetus of any supposed inner logic of their own or of any borrowed ritual gesture of completion. Adorno reinforced Said’s hatred of the claptrap of reconciliation, especially when, among its promoters were criminals, ‘world leaders’ among them, who hoped to use it as a way to efface their own actions and responsibility.

29 *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), 25

30 For a startlingly fine specimen of this, see Christopher Hitchens, *Orwell's Victory* (London, 2002).

31 *Minima Moralia*, 41

Postcolonialism requires a theory of power that abandons 'them' and 'us' as its governing terms. Those who are not like 'us' can only be understood in the terms the presiding 'we' dictate; this is true even if it can be shown that one term depends for its reality on the other. It is a tight, closed situation, made none the less so by the revelation that it is produced discursively. We produce alterity; it does not precede our production of it, even though believing that is the condition of the operation's success. Said, along with Bhabha and Spivak, long understood the jeopardy of a position, that had been argued too well — as he seemed to believe Foucault's had been. Rather than repay his debt to Foucault, he cancelled it. Bhabha and Spivak, on the other hand, and in their very different ways, repaid their debts to 'theory' by developing their own particular styles in the direction of the esoteric and the specialized, seeking the arcane where Said sought the familiar. For they wanted and found an exit, not from discursive power, but from the range of reference Said had ascribed to it. Bhabha, for instance, wanted to develop a subtle, taxing discourse for hybridity that would, as far as possible, escape or seem to escape from what appeared to be an almost fundamentalist binarism; Spivak, found in subalternity other populations below the horizon for whom everything, even their liberation, had been already so spoken-for that the effort was to enable these people — mostly women — to begin to speak and thereby create an alternative form of power to that which had silenced them. Said left himself no such options, largely because he did not believe either of these had the immediacy that the battle with and for knowledge and power demanded in the various places in the world (Palestine above all, of course) where it had become focused as a global issue. Further, it seemed to him that his own political connection with Palestine and the Palestinian National Authority charged his writing with an energy and demanded of it a clarity that it

would otherwise have lacked. Thus, he often regarded jargon or obscurity as a form of intellectual narcissism that is itself a consequence of having no urgent or actual involvement in a loaded political actuality; it is a fate to which academic criticism often consigns writers especially if they are — like Swift or Lukács — degraded and nullified thereby. This is obviously not a view that postcolonial criticism has taken especially to heart. But it needs to be distinguished from the notion that tough guys don't dance, that the to-tell-it-as-it-is school of writing, greatly favoured by essayists who are converts from an earlier 'fashionability', part Humphrey Bogart, part George Orwell, need not punish the language to express its thought.³⁰ Said had even less time for them than for the writers of jargon. Adorno remembered the politics of such straight talkers and writers:

Behind the pseudo-democratic dismantling of ceremony, of old-fashioned courtesy, of the useless conversation suspected, not even unjustly, of being idle gossip, behind the seeming clarifications and transparency of human relations that no longer admit anything undefined, naked brutality is ushered in. The direct statement without divagations, hesitations or reflections, that gives the other the facts full in the face, already has the form and timbre of the command issued under Fascism by the dumb to the silent. Matter-of-factness between people, doing away with all ideological ornamentation between them, has already itself become an ideology for treating people as things.³¹

Thus, for all his avoidance of jargon, Said sought always to find a way of agreeing with Adorno's belief that the intrinsic difficulty of thought requires a style of writing wholly answerable to it. This view was amplified in Adorno's account of modern art — literature and music in particular — in which the esoteric nature of

the art was both an avowal of the conditions of exile and obscurity to which art had been reduced in modernity and also a safeguard against art's co-optation by the 'culture industry'. It was the monopoly exercised by that industry which, in Miriam Hansen's phrase, 'makes technological progress all the more a catalyst of regression'.³² It was, however, with Said's adaptation of Adorno's ideas of 'late style' that he found at last a means of incorporating into his thinking and writing a combination of the mandarin-esoteric attitude and stylistic intricacy that has made Adorno so disliked in the popular culture world, and the civic democracy of his own essayistic style. Lukács and Adorno had both claimed for the essay as an art-form a special privilege in the broken world of the modern in which totality as a concept had been refused asylum.³³ Adorno's 1937 essay, 'Late Style in Beethoven' and the 1959 essay 'Alienated Masterpiece: The *Missa Solemnis*' seem to be the most likely sources for Said's meditations on last or late works by people such as Beethoven, Freud, Auerbach, Lampedusa, Adorno himself and, in a manner that is both subtle and obvious, Edward Said too. His own fatal illness, fought with over almost eleven years, clearly gave a melancholy lustre to his work, one that has been burnished the more by the deaths of Sebastiano Timpanaro in Italy in 2000, of Yasser Arafat in Paris and of Susan Sontag in New York last year. A whole constellation of intellectual practice, political adventurism, and stoical courage that had a peculiarly late (!) twentieth-century configuration faded with them in the light of the first years of the new century. What Edward Said set out to do was to capture something of the consciousness of lateness that is, of course, a feature of the end of any century (and in this instance of a millennium) but that can also help concentrate attention on the effect in works of art of the creator's consciousness of his or her own

approaching death and of the link between it and the death of an historical era or system which can only at this late moment be glimpsed or seen in retrospect, yet retains or re-creates all the intensity of the past life, now understood to be also a passing era.

The first two paragraphs of Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* provide a well-known instance of the enormously intricate relations that can be caught in the sequences of tenses — present, past perfect and imperfect — and in the chemistry between a word like *temps* with its continuities and pastnesses embalmed within it and a word like *fois* with its punctual singularity and traces of the peremptory summons of and by memory that is both voluntary and involuntary. Said had of course published *Beginnings: Intention and Method* in 1975 and it seems on the face of it appropriate that lateness should be the dominant theme of his work at the end. But beginnings and lateness signify more than a superficial contrast or tidy arrangement. They are Said's final pairing of critical terms, like filiation and affiliation, and they share the same kind of relationship. They are not merely opposites; they are effective, hermeneutic terms because within the process of generating their oppositeness, they reveal their similarity.

There is nothing amiable in this contradiction; it produces a disturbance that is not to be quelled by any of the systems of control — aesthetic conventions, for instance — that are introduced to do that. Rather the controlling system heightens the sense of disturbance, like police entering a district that has not internalized the idea of law-and-order; it is an idea that will be accepted if at all only through force, the patrolling of an area that previously had no consciousness of the boundaries that have now made it an area and a condition. This is what fascinated Said about both beginnings and endings. This is *Orientalism*

32 Miriam Hansen, 'Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing', in Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin, eds., *Adorno: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, 2002), 57–85 (66)

33 See Lukács's 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay', in *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (London, 1974), 1–18; Adorno, 'The Essay as Form', in Brian O'Connor, ed., *The Adorno Reader* (Oxford, 2000), 91–111.

- 34 Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*, notes and commentary by Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002), 517
 35 *Essays on Music*, 572
 36 *Essays on Music*, 579

replayed as a drama of interiority, but with all the régimes of discourse and control now seriously threatened by an internal rebellion which is native, not foreign, to them. The East, as mortality, faces the West as the system that has to regard that mortality as its Other and must, to that end, create all sorts of countering myths about it that deal with everything but finality.

The similarity of beginnings and endings lies in the element of the arbitrary they both possess. Begin and end where? And why there? Each has a logic that operates prospectively and retrospectively. Each faces an insoluble question. What is it that constitutes an origin? When did a society or a story, that bears within it the whole concept of a society, begin? Was there an agreement, a contract, a pre-existing condition out of which society emerged, a system out of nothingness? These are of course the Rousseau questions that Derrida asked again. It is strange to see the force of his thought manifest itself on Said's meditations so belatedly. It is in these reflections that Said begins to repay the debt he had cancelled earlier. Yet the largest, ultimately unpayable debt is to Adorno. For he had already asked the other question, over and over again — what is an ending? Given the generations that had seen so many endings in the twentieth century, why had apocalypse ended in the mortified consciousness of the intellectually and emotionally illiterate masses of the present? Part of his answer is that this is what constitutes the apocalypse. After Auschwitz, Hollywood. It is fortunate that he did not live to see the reproduction of Auschwitz by Hollywood.

In brief, according to Adorno, Beethoven in his late works became unlike 'Beethoven' by becoming very obedient to musical convention and amnesiac about harmony. These are not symptoms of age, decrepitude or some psychological malfunction. He repudiates these attempts to read 'lateness'

as a psychic condition of the composer. Instead, he claims that the somewhat ravaged state of these works is their deepest art; it indicates how Beethoven has abandoned the harmonies and consolations of art, as he previously had produced it. Yet in doing so, he has still produced art and in producing art he has still produced some hope for a future. But not a lot. 'Harmony suffers the same fate in late Beethoven as religion in bourgeois society: it continues to exist, but is forgotten.'³⁴ This is very far indeed from the trumpet solo in *Fidelio*, generally heard as the announcement of the triumph of freedom for and by the bourgeoisie; or even more so from the triumphalism and rhythmic pulsations of the choral finale in the Ninth Symphony, the 'Ode to Joy' that is now the anthem of the European Union and again was once heard as a celebration of liberal individuality. In the essay on the *Missa Solemnis*, the position is reversed. The work is not musically incoherent according to Beethoven's standard practice; rather it can be said 'to contain little that exceeds the circumference of traditional musical language'.³⁵ The question in part is why Beethoven composed a mass at all. The effort involved was, for Adorno, significant because by forcing himself to become obedient to the demands of an anachronistic and highly complex form, Beethoven was enacting the failure of bourgeois subjectivity. 'It is already to be counted among those efforts of the later bourgeois spirit which no longer hope to conceive and form in any concrete manner the universally human ...'.³⁶ This sounds curiously like Lukács writing about the failure of the novel after the bourgeois defeat of 1848. The immediate point is that the lateness involved here — an historical condition — manifests itself aesthetically in very curious ways, in works in which the affirming and consolatory features of musical composition (and of novel writing) have disappeared and been replaced by effects that are disruptive precisely because they show themselves to

be clinging to outmoded conventional forms that have lost the power to generate coherence between their parts. The music they produce is the sound of the historical failure of European humanism in its usual alliance with the bourgeois class or classes.

In *Freud and the Non-European* (2003), Said claims that Freud's late works — particularly *Moses and Monotheism* — were obsessed with returning 'to the very elements of identity itself, as if that issue so crucial to psychoanalysis, the very heart of the science, could be returned to in the way that Beethoven's late work returns to such basics as tonality and rhythm'.³⁷ This book itself is an attempt to include the whole issue of Palestine within a foundational Western discourse, like Freud's, an attempt that was met with much sectarian fury.³⁸ Further, in both Freud and Beethoven, 'the intellectual trajectory conveyed by the late work is intransigence and a sort of irascible transgressiveness, as if the author was expected to settle down into a harmonious composure, as befits a person at the end of his life, but preferred instead to be difficult, and to bristle instead with all sorts of new ideas and provocations'.³⁹ The risk Said takes here is twofold. On the one hand, there is the risk of a banality about heroic aging, the sort of platitude that is produced nowadays on an industrial scale by the endless confection of images of elderly serenity as a guarantor of wisdom — or, more usually, of the commercial reliability of a product. This hovers dangerously near the altogether remarkable notion that in late style, in these instances as with Auerbach, Lampedusa and others, what becomes visible is the possibility that where the heart of a discourse should be, there is nothing. Discourse that can produce so much in so successful and not necessarily coercive a spirit has perhaps no way of validating itself. Only perhaps. But decisively undecidable. This is where the grumpiness occasionally evident in various late conversations and interviews, as in a

querulousness about Beethoven and what he thought he was doing — as in Said's exchanges with Daniel Barenboim — gives way to a real anxiety that has no historical parallel of the kind that Adorno can always provide. The anxiety is that the relation between reflection and activism, so central to his whole career, is denied by the very nature of the work of art as such. It is a relationship fundamental to humanism, as he understood it. But if identity, tonality, and such fundamentals are questioned in these late works by the refusal to make relationship their characteristic and consoling action, something is wrong either with art or with humanism. Or perhaps it is in the nature of each to question the other's grounds for existence, and in so doing to reveal them. This brings Said back to his beginnings with Conrad and the fiction of autobiography, as his title has it. He ended as he began, at a beginning that could not be trusted as valid but had to be taken on trust as though it would finally prove itself to be so. Yet the narrative is there. The story was told, not of Edward Said's life, but of the life of an era that his life, like that of a character in a great novel, came to represent in an unforgettable manner. ■

37 *Freud and the Non-European* (London, 2003), 29

38 A characteristic example, Leon Wieseltier, 'The Ego and the Yid', *The New Republic*, 7 Apr. 2003, 38

39 *Freud and the Non-European*, 29–30