

Edward Said: the traveller and the exile

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In a major retrospective, Stephen Howe considers the life and work of the Palestinian scholar Edward Said.

“We travel like other people, but we return to
nowhere. As if travelling
Is the way of the clouds...
We have a country of words. Speak speak so I
can put my road on the
stone of a stone.
We have a country of words. Speak speak so
we may know the end of
this travel.”

Mahmoud Darwish, *We Travel Like Other
People*

The clouds hung heavily over New York as Edward Said, the great intellectual traveller, took his last journey on 24 September. That oppressive weather seemed all too gloomily and grimly appropriate, matching the mood of all who had known Said or admired his work – but its sudden shifts, alternating torrential rain with bursts of brilliant sunshine, also felt apt for the passing of so intellectually mercurial a man, so varied in his passions and his interests.

Said was in both literal and metaphorical senses a constant traveller: one who, in the words of another great poet, Arthur Rimbaud, changed countries almost as often as shoes. Having lost a country, Palestine, in early youth, he wrote often that he never felt fully at home anywhere – except perhaps in the ‘country of words’.

New York, where he died, and Columbia University where he taught for forty years, came closest. New York, as a place of multiple cultural formations, multiple migrancies, minorities and diasporas, as well as a centre of corporate, media and cultural power – and his own position there, combining privileged professional status with marginal, exilic consciousness – influenced everything he did and thought.

The figure of the traveller in Darwish’s poem stands for the Palestinian people, with whose fate and homelessness Edward Said’s entire career was also inextricably bound up. But for Said it had also a more

universal and more positive association. He once suggested that *the* theme of his work is the figure of crossing over: “The fact of migration is extraordinarily impressive to me: that movement from the precision and concreteness of one form of life transmuted or imported into the other...and then of course the whole problematic of exile and immigration enters into it, the people who simply don’t belong in any culture; that is the great modern or, if you like, postmodern fact, the standing outside of cultures.”

Accompanying the notion of the enabling intellectual consequences of an exilic position, Said therefore also suggested the idea of the ‘traveller’ as a desirable one for critical thinkers. It was an image which depended not on power, but on motion, on daring to go into different worlds, use different languages, and “understand a multiplicity of disguises, masks, and rhetorics. Travellers must suspend the claim of customary routine in order to live in new rhythms and rituals...the traveller crosses over, traverses territory, and abandons fixed positions all the time.”

This image is opposed to that of the scholar as monarch or ‘potentate’, proclaiming mastery over an academic field: this latter was in Said’s eyes a quite negative and destructive role, if not an impossibly hubristic one. Yet clearly, everything depends on *how* one travels. Those whose migrancy had been from colony to metropole, but whose ‘crossing over’ is to intellectual and emotional identification with the dominant metropolitan culture and political attitudes – a stance with which, for instance, he associated V.S. Naipaul – aroused Said’s intense anger and scorn.

A mediator of worlds

Edward Said was, by any measure, among the most important thinkers and writers of our time. His writings had a massive, worldwide impact both on scholarship and on wider public debate; an impact which traversed continents, audiences, and academic disciplines. Among literary critics and cultural theorists, historians, anthropologists, political analysts and even within the subdiscipline Said so bitterly attacked, third world ‘area studies’, his work is constantly cited, constantly drawn upon, almost as constantly criticised.

Furthermore, Said was not only an enormously productive and influential scholar, but a globally significant political voice. He was for many years a member of the Palestinian National Council, the Palestine Liberation Organisation’s ‘parliament in exile’, and a key mediator between Arab and American worlds both in public debate and, sometimes, in secret negotiation.

In the United States and to a great extent in the British and other European news media, he came constantly to be presented as the pre-eminent intellectual representative of ‘the Palestinian case’ or even ‘the Arab viewpoint’ – and latterly gained a very prominent media presence in the Arab world itself. He was certainly the best-known Arab intellectual of his and perhaps of any time, on a worldwide scale; indeed one of the few modern public intellectuals whose reputation was genuinely global.

Said’s work ushered in what seemed to be quite novel forms of cultural and historical study, and effectively founded two, still rapidly growing new academic genres, ‘postcolonial studies’ and ‘colonial discourse analysis’. As an *American Historical Review* symposium in 2000 documented, Said’s influence can be found, and is indeed very important,

in fields as far distant from his own main concerns as medieval history, studies of the Balkans, and American diplomatic history. The impact of those ideas has gone wider: it can be traced among visual artists and museum curators, novelists and film-makers, and a quite broad general reading public. To his admirers, Said became the ideal type of the critical intellectual.

His remarkable range of expertise and interests encompassed several academic disciplines and art forms as well as diverse political milieux. He wrote about, and had an impact on debates over, the study of history, politics, anthropology and geography, the influence of the media, the purposes of education and the responsibilities of the intellectual, ideas about migration, exile, diaspora and multiculturalism, religion, language and war, and many more. His career was a kind of standing rebuke to the narrow academic specialisation and pigeonholing which he himself often lamented.

All this made of him a very important kind of cultural-political interpreter or mediator between distant, often

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antagonistic worlds. But it also had its costs. At times, as he complained, his role as Palestinian spokesperson meant that he was treated in these media milieux 'like a diplomat of terrorism, with a place at the table.' Academic critics in several of the fields where he ventured angrily charged him with caricaturing, abusing or traducing their expertise.

For others, he was an intellectual hero. Indian historian Partha Chatterjee wrote that: "*Orientalism* was a book which talked of things I felt I had known all along but had never found the language to formulate with clarity. Like many great books, it seemed to say for the first time what one had always wanted to say."

Some saw the significance of Said's work as world-historical. Thus Sudipta Kaviraj proclaims that "In a truly heroic gesture of singlehanded revenge for what the West had done to his people, Edward Said wrote his *Orientalism*." Sumit Sarkar, less friendly, writes of living in "an intellectual climate saturated by Edward Said" where invocation of his ideas "has become obligatory".

Already at least four volumes of essays have been published in tribute to him, another four books are devoted to dissection of his thought, and hundreds more are indebted to or even plagiaristically dependent on his ideas. Less usually for a university teacher, he was also the subject of several television documentaries and profiles. With his death, that flow of secondary analysis and tribute will no doubt quickly become a flood.

It was partly his sheer range and mixture of roles – leading scholar among scholars, ubiquitous critic of imperialism in Reagan's, Clinton's and the Bushes' Americas, militant Palestinian in a public culture where pro-Zionism has been hegemonic – that accounted for the extent as well as the bitterly contested nature of Said's reputation.

But that is not to slight the power and range of his work itself. Whatever the flaws, the overstatements and the inconsistencies in his writings, they have lastingly transformed the map of contemporary intellectual life. And those inconsistencies are, in addition, often of a kind which will be found in the work of any major thinker when subjected to close reading, by a process which Said himself well described:

"(W)e come back over the text, we make distinctions, we move forward and back, and

occasionally, we discover these instances of ambiguity and even instability, where words may belong in one or another level of discourse."

The privilege of mobility

The bare facts of a life are recorded, now, in hundreds of obituary notices – and in some instances misrecorded, as with the *New York Times*' sloppy and mean-spirited 'tribute', or the London *Daily Telegraph*'s poisonous posthumous comments. They are important: for Said, perhaps more than for most authors and thinkers, biographical data may not explain, but do provide an essential explanatory backdrop to, the mass of his published texts.

These data, especially those of his early life, have also been accorded great symbolic and politically-charged significance both by Said himself and by some of his fiercest critics. For him too, more than for many writers – and certainly far more than for most academics – the circumstances of his past and present were constantly foregrounded in his writing. Indeed an ever more crucial element in his style and approach came to be the intimate intertwining of the autobiographical with the theoretical and the political.

Said was a product of the Palestinian upper middle class, his father a successful businessman. The family was also Protestant – members of the Anglican communion in Palestine, though his maternal grandfather was a Baptist minister in Nazareth and his parents were married in that church, while some other close relatives were Catholics – so that as a Protestant among mainly Eastern Orthodox Palestinian Christians, among overwhelmingly Muslim Palestinians, themselves soon to be a minority among Jewish Israelis, Said was in a Russian-doll minoritarian position which has been in the long run influential for his view of the world.

Yet his was, simultaneously, a highly privileged minority in both class and confessional terms. As was typical of that milieu, the family was geographically mobile. His father, Wadie Ibrahim Said, a native Jerusalemite (Edward's mother, of mixed Lebanese-Palestinian parentage, was from Nazareth and had been educated mainly in Lebanon), had left Palestine at the age of sixteen to escape the Ottoman military draft.

Wadie lived in the US in his later teens and early twenties, from 1911 to 1920. As a result, he and his family possessed US citizenship; a fact which was

significantly to shape Edward's later life. The relationship with his father seems, however, to have been distant. Edward always found Wadie 'rather mysterious' and 'very severe'. He 'rarely spoke, and when he did it was in Victorian platitudes'. His mother was a far warmer personality, the 'closest companion of my youth' who 'tried to spoil me' in compensation for the father's severity.

The Said family's connection to Jerusalem was broken in 1947-48. They were already settled mainly in Cairo well before this, while other relatives seem to have been among the many more prosperous Palestinians who exited before the crisis, at least in part because they could see it coming. Some Palestinian leftists, and some historians, have charged that such behaviour represented a treasonable abandonment of the national soil and cause by those who should have stayed and provided leadership for anti-Zionist resistance.

Sensitivity to such charges, however unfair, may partly account for Said's subsequent, occasional vagueness – at least until his extended 1999 memoir, *Out of Place* – about the extent and timing of his family's residence in Jerusalem, and the causes of their ceasing to be even occasional residents there. Such ambiguity provided a little plausible-sounding support, though no really valid basis, for some attempts near the end of his life to claim he had falsified his early history in order to appear 'more Palestinian' than he truly was.

Said attended a series of elite schools in Cairo: the Gezira Preparatory School, the Cairo School for American Children, then Victoria College. At Victoria College, the teaching staff were almost all British, and the English language was not just the medium of instruction but the only permitted language even of playground or sportsfield. The pupils, most of them Arabic-speaking, routinely defied the regulation; a resistance Said later associated with a then still inchoate but growing sense of Arab nationalism. Said's contemporaries at Victoria came from many parts of the region and many different ethnic or religious backgrounds: 'a motley crew of Arabs of various kinds, Armenians, Greeks, Italians, Jews and Turks'.

Said, though, was sent on to another prestigious school, Mount Hermon in Massachusetts: in his view,

his father deliberately chose somewhere as far away as possible from the Middle East. He thus moved from an ethnically varied to an extremely homogeneous environment, from which he transferred first as a student to Princeton, then Harvard, and in 1963 to a teaching post at Columbia.

Although he made regular visits to the Middle East, mainly to Lebanon where his parents settled – and where his widowed mother was to live throughout the tragedies of the 1970s and early 1980s civil wars, Israeli and Syrian invasions – and although some family members became closely involved in Palestinian exile and other Arab politics, he remained almost entirely disengaged from political activity until his early thirties.

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"I did really nothing else but study" as a graduate student and young lecturer, he recalled. Certainly he never wrote on Middle Eastern or other political themes before the late 1960s. He 'missed the revolution' of 1968 in US academia, which convulsed Columbia with especial drama, having been on sabbatical leave in the Middle East at the time.

An intellectual in politics

It was the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, so Said repeatedly stressed, which both induced his general turn towards politics and focused this on his region of birth. The Arab states' crushing defeat in that war was "the great event of my political life". For the first time he "felt genuinely divided between the newly assertive pressures of my background and language and the complicated demands of a situation in the US that scanted, in fact despised what I had to say about the quest for Palestinian justice."

Visiting Amman in 1969 – then very much the centre of Palestinian exile politics, before the following year's 'Black September' destruction of PLO influence in Jordan – he became intensely involved in Palestinian political activity, and began to write and broadcast on the subject in the US. Meanwhile he helped found and co-edited the *Arab Studies Quarterly*.

Full reconciliation or assimilation with either Arab or American worlds, however, never proved possible: "I always have the sense that I'm not really writing in my own language. In fact, I don't really know what my own language is. I use English, but I was brought up

speaking Arabic.” The childhood sense of being always ‘out of place’ was never entirely lost – but was rather turned to intellectually productive uses. The linguistic uncertainties surely also account for Said’s particular admiration for literary works like those of Ahdaf Soueif, which are among the handful of ‘Arabic novels in English’.

Throughout his long involvement in PLO politics, Said never joined any of the Palestinian political parties nor even became formally a member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation itself. When he later sat on the Palestinian National Council (PNC) it was as an independent. He was, however, initially sympathetic to the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, often seen as the most leftist, internationalist and intellectual of the guerrilla groupings. In later years, his nearest friends and associates were more often to be found in the dominant Fatah faction of the PLO, and he was for a time close to and acted as an adviser for its leader Yasser Arafat.

Said joined the PNC in 1977, and resigned from it in September 1991 – because, he says, of the coincidence of his disillusion with the direction taken by Palestinian and especially Arafat’s politics, with Said himself being diagnosed as gravely ill from leukemia. Ordinarily, it seems, his participation in PNC activities was limited – he rarely spoke or even voted, and often did not remain for the whole duration of meetings.

He later referred to his membership of the body as having been “for symbolic reasons”. Yet Said was responsible for the English version of the 1988 PLO declaration of statehood, and reports that much of its phraseology was indeed his own, overruling suggested changes even from Arafat himself. And for his writings and media interventions on Palestinian issues, he came to be quite widely seen as ‘the voice of Palestinian nationalism’, especially in the US.

In 1978-79, in an incident which he has described briefly in various articles and interviews, he seemed to be given the opportunity to open a back channel for US-PLO dialogue or even negotiations. Said was invited by secretary of state Cyrus Vance to be conduit for proposals from Washington to Arafat, and vice versa.

Said tried to fulfil this role, but he claimed that the PLO leadership simply refused to take up the opportunity; although the US proposals offered Palestinians considerably more than was to be

accepted by Arafat in the 1990s. Said’s first return visit to Israel/Palestine was in 1992: at the time of the Israeli elections which brought Yitzhak Rabin to power and thus initiated what became the Oslo peace agreement.

Subsequently he returned several times, writing and making a TV documentary about his experiences, and offering ever sharper criticisms of the emerging structure of PLO rule in Gaza and parts of the West Bank. He rejected strongly, then publicly and repeatedly criticised, the ‘peace process’ which followed the Oslo meetings; viewing it as a betrayal of Palestinian aspirations and rights.

Said was among the first Palestinian intellectuals to take part in unofficial meetings with Israeli ‘doves’ – though eventually he came to believe such meetings served little purpose, at least in the form which they usually assumed in the 1970s and 1980s. He was also among the first to advocate Palestinian recognition of Israel’s existence, and to repudiate ‘terrorist’ violence as both immoral and counterproductive: but simultaneously, wrote trenchantly on the blindnesses and dishonesties involved in much western public discourse about Middle Eastern ‘terrorism’ and especially the ways in which the Palestinian cause as such became stigmatised as essentially terrorist in character.

That kind of stigmatisation was frequently visited on Said himself; and the attacks were not only verbal. He encountered death threats, first from extremist Jews and later, ironically, from ultra-nationalist Arabs who thought his stance too conciliatory. His office at Columbia was firebombed. In the 1980s especially, his lectures on the Middle East on campuses and elsewhere throughout the United States frequently drew protests and even physical disruption from militant Jewish-American groups. He also, unsurprisingly, received a vast quantity of hate mail.

More recent and even more distasteful instances of the kind of passions – and vilification – Said evoked included the artificial storms whipped up in 2001 after a seemingly rather trivial incident: he was photographed throwing a stone across the Lebanese-Israeli border. In the aftermath, among other disreputable responses, some students and others at Columbia demanded his dismissal, and the Freud Institute in Vienna withdrew a prior invitation for him to lecture there.

The landscapes of the mind

Meanwhile his American and subsequently worldwide reputation as first a literary, then a more wide-ranging cultural and political, critic became ever higher. The breakthrough stemmed first from his 1975 book *Beginnings*, (his 1966 *Joseph Conrad* having sunk into relative obscurity), but was decisively established by his 1978 work *Orientalism*. The latter initiated a kind of trilogy on western representations of the Middle East; the subsequent, more narrowly focused and directly political volumes were *The Question of Palestine* (1980) and *Covering Islam* (1981).

1984's *The World, the Text, and the Critic* collected the previous several years' essays on literary theory, and he continued to offer thoughts on 'the future of criticism', but his interests were moving ever more thoroughly away from that field and into historical and political questions. In 1986 he published *After the Last Sky*, an emotive essay on Palestinian identity including strong autobiographical elements and accompanied by Jean Mohr's remarkable photographs.

A very different kind of book appeared in 1991: *Musical Elaborations* was the most substantial reflection of his lifelong musical interests. Meanwhile he was publishing several lengthy essays on imperialist themes in the work of such diverse artists as Jane Austen, Rudyard Kipling, Giuseppe Verdi and Albert Camus: all these went into the making of his massive 1993 book *Culture and Imperialism*.

Subsequently he collected much of his writing on Middle Eastern politics in *The Politics of Dispossession* (1994a), *Peace and Its Discontents* (1995a), and *The End of the Peace Process* (2000a); the first including several lengthy reflective essays as well as more occasional pieces, the latter volumes consisting mainly of polemical articles originally published in Arabic. *Representations of the Intellectual*, also in 1994, derived from his Reith Lectures on BBC radio, and drew together the results of another lifelong preoccupation. In 1999 he published *Out of Place*, a memoir of his early life and family.

At the end of 2000 most of his hitherto uncollected essays and longer reviews, spanning three decades and ranging from the densely philosophical, through the fiercely polemical, to the elegiacally autobiographical, appeared as *Reflections on Exile and other Essays*

(2000). In 2001-03, there appeared *Power, Politics and Culture*, a collection of interviews – many of them major intellectual statements in their own right – edited by his friend and former student Gauri Viswanathan, another and slimmer interview book with David Barsamian, and a volume of collaborations and conversations with Daniel Barenboim. The final major publication of Edward's lifetime was a small book on *Freud and the Non-European*, the text of a lecture at the London Freud Museum.

A still further collection of political writings, a book on opera, and a study of the idea of 'late style' were in preparation in his last years. He also said that he intended to produce a major study of 'humanism in America'. A number of essays already published clearly relate to these works in progress, and we can hope that large parts of them were far advanced enough for posthumous publication.

Despite his severe ill-health, he continued to write, lecture, broadcast and travel intensively almost up to his last days. The final publications still embraced both literary and cultural themes, and directly political interventions such as his fierce opposition to Nato military action over Kosovo in 1999 and to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Contours of cultural influence

Edward Said could be viewed as a great exponent of the deployment and redeployment of cultural capital. The savings accumulated in one sphere can be spent – or reinvested – in another. After building a reputation initially as a literary critic and theorist, he was able to use the credit gained there to obtain an audience for his views on Middle East politics.

More, status as a prominent scholar of the humanities and a professor at one of America's most prestigious universities made it possible for him to state a case which was otherwise almost beyond the American pale: the case for Palestinian grievances and nationhood. No other Arab in the US could have done that; not even the scattering of other Palestinian academics there or elsewhere in the west.

Said would not have been given access to prime-time TV or the pages of the US's better newspapers if he had not already amassed a considerable repute as a literary scholar. Subsequently, the process was able to operate in the other direction too: his prominence as a political

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and media figure gave his literary and cultural writings a public profile and a size of readership that few if any 'pure' literary critics could match.

But this is to put it too simply, and perhaps too cynically. Said was not just someone who moved to and fro, or transferred cultural capital, between literary studies and politics. His most important work – in a sense, all his work since the late 1970s – mixed those things, and was influential above all because of the arguments he made about the inevitability of their mixing.

He was most famous for his insistence, ever since his celebrated (though also bitterly attacked) book *Orientalism*, on the ubiquitous intertwining of culture and imperialism: how a vast range of cultural products, from the masterpieces of Jane Austen, Flaubert or Verdi to most contemporary academic writing about the Middle East, is deeply implicated in the histories of European and latterly of US aggression against the rest of the world.

It might also be underlined that whilst it took Said's substantial credentials of expertise and scholarly clout to get media access for his decidedly challenging views, people with no discernible proficiency in relevant knowledges can rather easily and routinely gain such access if what they say better fits the dominant culture's preconceptions. Said himself often noted and polemicised about this – how in the US especially, quite ignorant pundits (most typically, greenhorn journalists) can be accepted as 'authorities' on Middle Eastern or Islamic affairs provided they simply repeat what is already 'known' to the public sphere about Islamic barbarism or Arab incompetence.

Although he was based in New York, Said's influence as a uniquely personable and effective advocate of Palestinian rights was almost as great in Britain, where pro-Palestinian activism had long been dominated by two small, wildly incompatible cliques, neither of which could gain much credit outside their own spheres.

There were factions of the ultra-left for whom the Palestinian struggle was part of the always-imminent world revolution; and there were ageing conservatives, often ex-Foreign Office officials or politicians, for whom Palestinophilia was an outgrowth of their romantic Arabism, of their lucrative links with various oil-rich regimes, or sometimes, it must be said, of ill-disguised anti-semitism.

Said, essentially a man of the moderate Left, quite detached both from the wilder shores of Trotskyism and from the embrace of the Gulf sheikhs, and someone who (despite regular, predictable and dishonest smears) could never credibly be called an anti-semite, effortlessly transcended those polarities.

There has been no shortage of Palestinian intellectuals and public figures: from the early propagandists, poets and novelists to the historians and other scholars who have latterly begun to reconstruct the Palestinian national story in great and accurate detail. Hardly any of them, though, has a known image or reputation outside specialist circles.

Said was the great exception: for international and especially north American audiences, he was the voice of Palestine. Only Yasser Arafat is better known on a global scale as a public image of the Palestinian cause. And in many ways Said – elegant as against Arafat's calculated bristly unkemptness, massively fluent as against Arafat's inarticulacy in English, a widely cultured aesthete as compared to Arafat's lack of any known non-political interests – was the chairman's antithesis, and latterly of course his opponent.

For those who disliked Said or his message, his very charm and urbanity were dangerous: he was far too unlike their stereotypes of 'the Arab'. Some critics, like an anonymous *Sunday Telegraph* profelist (1993), even seemed obscurely to hold Said's physical good looks against him.

Yet his purpose had, he insisted, never been to act as a cheerleader for 'third worldist' counter-assertions. Far from it: he repeatedly scorned what he called 'the politics of blame', even if occasionally – usually when stung by hostile criticism – he seemed to slip into it himself. His own utopian vision was not one of nationalist purity but of global interconnections and cultural mingling.

There is a deep and almost tragic irony – not lost on Said himself – that this quintessentially cosmopolitan man spent so much of his career as publicist for a nationalist movement. The irony is only deepened by the fact that Said came to view that movement's institutional form – Arafat's semi-state in the West Bank and Gaza – with bitter contempt for its ineptitude, corruption and increasingly repressive character.

Most recently, he appealed for Jewish and Arab intellectuals, in their diasporas as well as in the Middle

East, to engage in a new kind of dialogue, based on mutual recognition of past suffering – of the Holocaust and the *Nakba*. This built again on a longstanding theme: Said's insistence that creating peace with justice in the Middle East required acts of acknowledgement, even atonement, for past wrongs – above all, naturally enough in his perspective, statements of atonement by Israelis for the dispossession of the Palestinians.

He urged the need for a Palestinian, and still more a wider Arab, coming to terms with the realities of Israel. Part of this process is that Arabs must come to understand better the burden of Jewish history, just as Israelis must do for the Palestinian past – and this must include recognising the power and resonance of memory of the Holocaust, eschewing the tendency among some Arab intellectuals to flirt with or admire such anti-semitic European figures as Roger Garaudy; a tendency Said viewed as morally and politically disastrous. And he extended his reflections, both autobiographical and theoretical, on the ambiguities of identity to a somewhat startling conclusion:

For his admirers, there is a quality of the unexpected constantly to be found in his work, one that is sadly rare in the routinised world of academia.

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image alt text popup image alt text full image
alt text caption: include pull quot "I'm the last Jewish intellectual. You don't know anyone else. All your other Jewish intellectuals are now suburban squires. From Amos Oz to all these people here in America. So I'm the last one. The only true follower of Adorno. Let me put it this way: I'm a Jewish?Palestinian."

A humanist intellectual

Said's appeal to many readers has been a matter not only of the multiple and arresting themes he has addressed, or the innovative character of much of his work, but of style too. He modestly insisted that his own prose does not rise above the level of craft: "I am not an artist", he once urged. Yet much of his writing, if it is 'only' craftsmanship, is of an indubitably high order.

His most personal and impassioned books, *Out of Place* and *After the Last Sky*, achieve moments of great rhetorical power, and others of intense pathos; as do many of his shorter essays. For his admirers, there is a

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His reputation and influence thus owed much also to his personality, as revealed or presented in his writing and public appearances. This persona could appear irascible, sometimes a little sanctimonious, certainly intolerant of criticism. As one friendly critic, W.J.T. Mitchell, put it, he seemed "to vacillate between the professional tones of the immensely learned scholar, working collaboratively to sift the innumerable details of specific colonial episodes, and the voice of the prophet crying in the wilderness, alienated even from the community he has helped to create."

But alongside his many other qualities – of humour, charm, erudition – the Edward Said that gradually unfolded to public view across many years' writing had a quality even rarer among senior academics than it is with most other kinds of public figure: he was seldom if ever pompous. His work gave the reader an intense and ever increasing sense of engaging one in conversation with an erudite, sometimes aggressive, but open,

indeed often startlingly vulnerable man.

Beginnings, the first really influential work, can be tough going; its style is more compressed, its matter often more abstract and philosophical than any of the later books. Said was then one of the pioneers in developing literary theory as a heavyweight academic subject in its own right, and *Beginnings* is dense with references to thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche, Claude Levi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, and above all Giambattista Vico and Michel Foucault. Later, Said reflected, he deliberately moved toward a more accessible style.

Yet it soon became apparent that Said's approach and intentions were radically different from those of most literary theorists. As he later noted, the newfound enthusiasm for theory in the 1970s was widely seen as insurrectionary, as being somehow loosely associated with the radical ferment of 1968 and after in US, French and other western universities and societies. In fact, though, the impact of the new theoretical currents in North America soon appeared to become far removed from any obvious political engagement.

Indeed as Said complained, much of this theoretical work abandoned 'the existential actualities of human life, politics, societies and events'.

Already in a 1976 interview, he was saying that while he shared many of the theoretical interests of critics like Harold Bloom and of the Yale deconstructionists, he regretted their lack of concern with historical and political questions. Paul de Man's influence, in particular, dictated a formalistic, indeed technical style of 'deconstructive' reading, seemingly sharply divorced from any political or social concerns (de Man's own dark political secret, his past as a Nazi collaborator and anti-semitic writer in wartime Belgium, was only revealed after his death).

Said insisted that he was himself, by contrast, motivated above all by politico-moral concerns: "I guess what moves me mostly is anger at injustice, an intolerance of oppression, and some fairly unoriginal ideas about freedom and knowledge." It should be noted, though, that whereas his writing constantly intertwined these things, he was insistent that in his role as a teacher he deliberately eschewed any political role or intention to proselytise.

In his best work, he often blended together an argument about a particular literary or musical text, a conception of the functionings of cultural representation, a view of history, and a politico-moral stance, into a seamless and eloquent whole. A complex set of ideas was expressed in prose of deceptive limpidity.

And he kept more affiliations to tradition than did most of his deconstructionist and poststructuralist contemporaries. He retained high regard for the sheer scholarly weight of the philological tradition, to which he continued often to refer back in affirmative terms in his later work including *Orientalism*, even as he also criticised that tradition for its ethnocentrism and its associations with colonial expansion.

More strikingly still, Said remained in some troubled, ambiguous but strong sense a traditional humanist, at a time when French-model anti-humanism was hegemonic among avant-garde critics – as indeed it still was in the late 1990s. Even when Said was most under the influence of such theories and especially of Michel Foucault, in the 1970s, he kept his distance from them in this regard, frequently qualifying Foucault's and Derrida's anti-humanism with such adjectives as 'bleak', 'tyrannical' and 'nihilistic'. And in early essays like that on Merleau-Ponty, his

enthusiasm is reserved for those figures in modern French thought who stress the immediacy and concreteness of lived experience – those who remain humanists – as against the constructors of grand but alienating philosophical systems.

An inner ambivalence

Nonetheless, there are important connections between the earlier and the later work. Some of these connections may be sought in the idea of beginning itself. Said was always interested in the notion of politics as an affair of rival narratives, with each movement trying to validate its picture of the world by telling a tale about its own birth and origin.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a classic example. He often noted that presenting the Palestinian case in the world media meant having to keep retelling the story from the start, insisting that there *is* a story. Indeed this became a characteristic trope of Said's: to link the uses or abuses of language directly with political programmes. He suggested that a bygone and to-be-mourned European humanism as represented by writers like Auerbach, Adorno and Blackmur had been replaced by a configuration which owed a great deal to various cultural nationalisms (enshrined in ideas of 'the national canon') on the one hand, ever more arcane and formalistic academic specialisms on the other.

He contrasted this situation with the far more attractive and vigorous atmosphere he found among historians, from whose work he clearly drew most of his intellectual inspiration in recent years. He insisted, indeed, that in his own work: "I'm nothing if not historically based. I've always said that the study of literature is basically a historical discipline."

One of the problems with his most influential work, as several critics noted, is that in raising such important general questions about the ideas of culture and representation, Said failed to state very clearly what aspects or inflections of them were specific to Orientalist discourses. His questions thus themselves raise further ones, which go to the heart of all his later writing. What, if anything, makes 'transcultural' interpretation and representation different from other kinds? Does this very way of posing the issue not risk reifying and essentialising the idea of 'a culture'? Is it the case that all cultures and societies tend to produce hostile or reductive images of those outside their own boundaries – as Said sometimes seemed to suggest, especially in his later work?

If so, what makes Orientalism as he defines it distinctive: its unusually elaborate, systematic and enduring character, the directness and strength of its affiliations to political power and especially to colonialism, its especially arrogant claims to constitute 'objective' knowledge, or perhaps its capacity not only to (mis)describe, but actually to create, that which it treats?

In different places, Said appeared to assert all these and more. Thus there is what one of *Orientalism's* most thoughtful critics, James Clifford, called a persistent hermeneutical short-cut at the very heart of the book's argument. Said himself later offered yet another kind of short-cut, claiming in *Covering Islam* – albeit in a judgment which seems at odds with much that he had elsewhere written – that his view is: “(n)ot that Orientalism is more biased than other social and humanistic sciences; it is simply as ideological and as contaminated by the world as other disciplines.”

Said's thought, then, was amphibious – or ambivalent – in its most basic epistemological assumptions. Whilst often arguing that the objects of knowledge are always discursively constructed, he could also be found, especially in his most polemical vein, engaged in asserting empirical truths against alleged misrepresentation or fabrication.

The apparent inconsistency of *Orientalism* in this regard has been noted by many critics: is 'the Orient' a purely discursive construct, or is there a 'real Orient' which has been misunderstood or traduced in politically interested ways by western scholars? Said's own most direct response was bluffly commonsense: there is no problem here because “Obviously enough, there could be no Orientalism without, on the one hand, the Orientalists, and on the other, the Orientals.” Obviously enough, this statement does not resolve the difficulty. Nor did his numerous subsequent reflections on such issues, above all in 1993's *Culture and Imperialism*, seem to his critics to do so.

Orientalism, and most of Said's subsequent work, are then about the relationship between culture and politics, or between the making of images and narratives and the exercise of power. Those Europeans and, later, North Americans who wrote about the East did so in ways inescapably shaped and determined by

their countries' drive to dominate and exploit Oriental peoples.

The sheer inequality of power relations between West and East could not but be reflected in – and furthered by – their writings, even if as individuals they might be sympathetic or attracted to the cultures they described. But more directly, very many of these writers were closely associated with the drive for colonial power.

A high proportion of the earlier European Orientalists whom Said discusses were employees of, or in some way commissioned and funded by, colonial authorities. The later American ones were just as often associated with the US's 'foreign policy establishment' or, in some cases, with that of Israel. Said's critiques of such figures often shifted emphasis between stressing the broader and less direct association of artists and scholars with political power, through a shared discursive formation, and emphasising instead their more simple and obvious affiliations of jobs, money, or political interest: shifts, that is, between stress on what Said called 'latent' Orientalism and its more easily evident 'manifest' forms.

What remained consistent was Said's indignant humanism, his eloquent and morally compelling critique not only of imperialism's continuing legacies, but of self-styled oppositional theories which perpetuate imperialism's cultural assumptions while claiming to reverse them.

“In our wish to make ourselves heard, we tend very often to forget that the world is a crowded place, and that if everyone were to insist on the radical purity or priority of one's own voice, all we would have would be the awful din of unending strife, and a bloody political mess, the true horror of which is beginning to be perceptible here and there in the re-emergence of racist politics in Europe, the cacophony of debates over political correctness and identity politics in the United States, and – to speak about my own part of the world – the intolerance of religious prejudice and illusionary promises of Bismarckian despotism, a la Saddam Hussein and his numerous Arab epigones and counterparts.” (*Culture and Imperialism*, p. xxiii)

Is 'the Orient' a purely discursive construct, or is there a 'real Orient' which has been misunderstood or traduced in politically interested ways by western scholars?

Adventures of the aesthetic

His recent work also moved ever more decisively toward celebrating or emphasising recuperation of the voices of the colonised, the anticolonialist and postcolonial – as against critics' complaints that in *Orientalism* everything was dictated by the worldview of the powerful. Narratives of historical change could (or, Said seems sometimes to imply, against the academic 'spirit of the age', necessarily do) carry messages of progress and emancipation.

For Said, the intellectual still has – or could have – a degree of autonomy from political power. He insists, then, on the importance of the individual author's responsibility. She or he can choose to write and act in politically accountable, and emancipatory, ways. The institutions of academia, media and intellectual production are not inherently bound to the service of imperialism; though they can choose to betray their true avocation and become its servants – and in the US, he says, they usually have done so. Said was surely right to urge that "Resistance cannot equally be an adversarial alternative to power and a dependent function of it, except in some metaphysical, ultimately trivial sense." And he was right against many of those who have been most influenced by him.

Said's conception of artistic value was an unashamedly 'conservative' one: his tastes in literature and in music are classical and canonical. He said that: "I do believe that some literature is actually good, and that some is of bad quality, and I remain as conservative as anyone when it comes to, if not the redemptive quality inherent in reading a classic rather than staring at a TV screen, then the potential enhancement of one's sensibility and consciousness by it."

In *Orientalism*, as he later noted, "the heroes are basically the novelists" as opposed to the academics and policy-makers. In the visual arts his avowed tastes were also very much within an established canon: Picasso, Cezanne, El Greco and above all Goya. Yet some critics – usually people who have only the dimmest knowledge of Said's actual work, or who have their own political axes to grind – have attacked his aesthetic stance by way of viewing him not as an elitist but as some kind of cultural vandal, aiming crudely to debunk or devalue the great artworks of western history by dragging them into the dirt of sordid materialism and past racial arrogance.

Thus Peter Conrad, in a particularly silly phrase, described Said as a "master of querulous special

pleading." This is very far from the truth. In the instance which apparently aroused most fury, Said's treatment of Jane Austen, he is not saying "*Mansfield Park* has a half-hidden subtext of colonial slavery and exploitation; so you shouldn't read it." Works of genius remained, for him, masterpieces: to see how they relate to issues of political, economic and racial power is to understand them in a new and deeper way, not at all to diminish them.

He has been just as scornful of the idea that the works of Dead White European Men should be banned from the 'multicultural' classroom as any conservative could be. If anything, perhaps Said overstated the greatness of some stridently imperialist art: he praised Rudyard Kipling to the skies, and would even write unaffectedly and affectionately of how his own son Wadie reminded him of Kipling's Kim. Equally, he wrote with pleasure, nostalgia and more than a little abiding love for Johnny Weissmuller's *Tarzan* films, which most 'anti-imperialist' critics would dismiss with total scorn.

Said's celebration of the freedom from social and political constraints which he found in some great music may also, however, reflect a wider shift in some of his own preoccupations. In discussing the idea of 'late style' which so fascinated him in his last years, he found in the last great works of such artists as Beethoven, Bach and Ibsen a turning away from the public roles which they had embraced in their earlier lives, a 'turning inward' and a new emphasis on the private, the personal and on the forms of art itself.

In part prompted, as he openly acknowledged, by his own illness and awareness of impending mortality, Said begun to develop his own 'late style', where (without abandoning his lifelong concerns with the public, political and social implications of art and writing, let alone his political engagement) he too introduced a greater stress on the private and the inward. It was expressed most obviously in *Out of Place* and other late-1990s autobiographical writings, but also in his perceptions of such figures as Adorno, Beethoven, or Britten.

There was a new, or renewed, fascination with the intensity of private satisfactions found in reading as a 'solitary and consciously interpretative' process, and in the act of writing itself, both as sensuous pleasure (but also hard physical work: in one of his *al-Ahram* columns Said ponders on the sheer unrelenting labour involved in any kind of serious creation, and especially in that labelled genius) and as "a refusal of the silence

that most of us experience as ordinary citizens who are unable to effect change”.

Today, he feared, we may be losing that connection, and thus that special kind of stubborn intellectual heroism. We cannot, he insists, afford to do so, but must find new ways of pursuing the values once embodied by the solitary writer wrestling with ink and paper, ways appropriate to a globalised and electronic age.

The dialectics of opposition

Perhaps Said remained uncertain, emotionally torn right to the end, as to how far his wider themes of cultural hybridity, of colonialism as a shared experience to be understood contrapuntally, of reconciliation and syncretism, could really be applied in the especially painful territory of Israeli-Palestinian relations. In some of his 1990s writings there are hints that these perspectives may, cautiously, find a home there too. Here again, however, his view darkened with time; and that notion of a different and better future seemed far more distant: this was ‘a dialectical conflict’, but one with no possible synthesis.

Did Said perhaps over-insist on his own isolation and marginality? Did that sense of himself perhaps owe as much to the particular strains on his childhood self-image, especially those induced by the complex and difficult relationship with his parents which he analysed so poignantly in *Out of Place*, as to adult political stances and circumstances? Is there a touch of exaggeration, even of vaingloriousness, in the insistence on the necessary loneliness of the critical intellectual? Have there not been costs, as well as gains, in the ever greater prominence which Said’s writing has given to his own background and circumstances, from the relatively brief, Gramscian invocation of “an attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject” in *Orientalism* to the repeatedly autobiographical register of his more recent writings?

Even if we feel there is some justice in such complaints, at least we may be grateful for the seriousness with which Said took these issues. Although the stance of the intellectual for him should ideally always be a dissenting and oppositional one, and although he has suggested that “I am much more

interested in the politics of loss and dispossession than I am in the politics of triumph and fulfilment”, this has never been reducible to opposition for its own sake, as it has seemed to be for some postmodernists.

So many of his central themes have not been about the polarity and negativity of unalloyed oppositionism, but (even in what many saw as his most purely negative stance, against the Israeli-Palestinian ‘peace process’) about the search for more inclusive and affirmative alternatives; or in more theoretical vein have been about connections and counterpoints.

Edward Said reflected many times on the benefits, and the strains, of being an outsider – an exile. Usually, he stressed the intellectual advantages to be gained from such a position; and granted the intellectual exile or migrant an especially crucial role in modern culture. He suggested that an ‘exilic’ consciousness, and always problematic relationship to a lost ‘home’, shaped his entire critical disposition and influenced the way he thought and wrote, even in his least political works.

Edward Said reflected many times on the benefits, and the strains, of being an outsider – an exile.

Most of his own work’s greatest strengths and insights, too, came from this position on the margins. He also, though, pointed to the dangers of this position: “You could be an outsider, and become more of an outsider, and cultivate your own garden, feel paranoia, all the rest of it.” His memoir of childhood, *Out of Place*, concludes by reaffirming the freedom that can be won by being always ‘not quite right’, never feeling fully at home, experiencing oneself and one’s life as an unstable ‘cluster of flowing currents’ rather than a fixed, solid entity. Yet the enduring pain which repeatedly surfaces in the memoir is also testimony to the emotional costs which that stance exacted from him.

Still, like Frantz Fanon, he was deeply committed to the belief that “a subjective experience can be understood by others”. That belief impelled almost all his work. It underpinned his passionate, and perhaps unfashionable, faith in the redemptive powers of great imaginative literature. And it drove the uniquely potent mixture of analysis, diagnosis, advocacy, polemic and confession which characterised his best writing.

Perhaps, even, the sheer recurrent inconsistency of Said’s arguments is what saved him from the worst

excesses of much contemporary academic 'radicalism'. He was unable to be as persistently ahistorical, essentialising and manichean as are many of those who have, ironically, been inspired by his own work. Maybe inconsistency is not, in this field at least, so great an intellectual sin. It may even be a sign of intellectual honesty.

Said's importance lies finally and mainly in the range and power of the questions he has raised, rather than in his own answers to those questions. He therefore almost invites us to refer back to the closing lines of *Beginnings*, written almost three decades ago:

"In the course of studying for and writing this book, I have opened, I think, possibilities for myself (and hopefully for others) of further problematics to be explored...These are studies to which I hope our moral will shall be equal – if in part this beginning has fulfilled its purpose."

Edward Said's death removes hope that he could fully pursue the many possibilities that his work opens up; but whoever now does pursue them, the honour of the beginning, of the first discoveries and of the moral example, will be his.

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