

Orientalism and After

An Interview with Edward Said

Edward Said is a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, New York and editor of Arab Studies Quarterly. Best known academically for his book Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient (1978), which was a milestone in the redefinition of the concerns of literary studies, he is most widely known for his tireless representations on behalf of the cause of the Palestinian people. His writings span the areas of literary criticism, politics and music. His works include: The Question of Palestine (1980); Covering Islam (1981); The World, The Text, and the Critic (1983); After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives (1986); and Musical Elaborations (1991). His latest book, Culture and Imperialism, is forthcoming from Jonathan Cape.

RP: Perhaps we could begin by asking you to say something about your intellectual and political background in the late 1950s and '60s. How did you identify yourself politically in relation to the civil rights and student movements in the USA during the period when you were a young member of faculty at Columbia? What from that period of your life was a formative influence on your later work?

Said: Well, in the 1950s I was a student and by 1957 I had finished my undergraduate education. I then went back to the Middle East for a year, basically to play the piano. And then in '58 I came back to graduate school, at Harvard, and I just plunged into that. I did really nothing else but study for five years. My family remained in the Middle East and moved from Egypt, where they had come after 1948, to Lebanon. My entire family became refugees in 1948. One member of my family, in particular, whom I saw in Cairo in those years, was very active in Arab politics, as a Palestinian. This is the period of Nasserism. He was there because Nasser was bringing into Egypt a lot of these revolutionary types from the Arab world. His name was Kamal Nasir, and although he was a Baathi at the time he was also a Nasserite. Later he became a spokesman for the Palestinian movement in Amman in the late '60s. Then he moved to Beirut, after Black September, and in 1973 he was one of the three

leaders assassinated by the Israelis in April of that year – I had seen him that very night actually. So that was going on. But I was largely oblivious of it, in the sense that I was focused on my studies. I got my Ph.D. in 1963 and moved to New York where I took up a position at Columbia in English. Then, too, I was pretty focused on that and writing my first book, on Conrad.

With the emergence of the civil rights movement in the middle '60s – and particularly in '66-'67 – I was very soon turned off by Martin Luther King, who revealed himself to be a tremendous Zionist, and who always used to speak very warmly in support of Israel, particularly in '67, after the war. In 1968 the Columbia revolution occurred, but I was away for that academic year! It was the revolution I missed. I was like Fabrice del Dongo looking for the Battle of Waterloo. I was on leave at a research centre in the Middle West, and I got a telegram from the President of the University saying, "There's a faculty meeting on such and such a day." So I trekked all the way back to Columbia, and when I got there, they wouldn't let me in the meeting, although I was a member of the faculty, because I didn't have an up-to-date ID card. So I stood outside while this momentous event was taking place.

When I returned to Columbia in the fall of '68, I got quite involved in the anti-Vietnam campus activities. Many of the students who had been involved in the revolution were students of mine. But it was the period when the emergence of the Palestinian movement was also occurring. And for the first time in my life I got involved in Palestinian politics, as did some of my family and school friends. A contemporary of mine from Harvard, for example, gave up his position at the University of Washington and went to Amman to become a full-time cadre. He was killed in 1976, during the Lebanese war, in rather obscure circumstances. He was a very important figure in the movement, and there is still a question-mark over who killed him and why. He was the one who introduced me in 1972 to Jean Genet, who was in Beirut. He was the man who took Genet around. He's referred to in Genet's last work, *Prisoner of Love* as Abu Omar.

Anyway, I went to Amman in 1969 and got involved in the movement – not to stay there, but as an expatriate. I began to write about politics for the first time in my life, to be published in America, and to appear on television and

radio. This was all in the aftermath of the '67 war, which was the great event of my political life. I was in Amman during the summer of 1970 right up until the fighting broke out. I simply had to go back to my teaching. I was there for the National Council meeting. (I wasn't a member then. I became a member in 1977.) That was the first time I ever saw Arafat, in 1970, in Amman. Then, after Black September, the movement drifted into Beirut. My mother lived in Beirut, so I would go to Beirut a great deal. That year I married a Lebanese woman, and for the next twelve years, 1970 to 1982, I was very involved in Palestinian politics in Beirut, as an expatriate. I always tried to steer clear of the inter-party fighting. I was not interested. For a time people thought I was – as indeed I was, in the early days – sympathetic to the Democratic Front. But I was never a member, and I never got involved in the disputes between them. Arafat made use of me, in a way, because I was in America. They came to the United Nations in '74, and I helped with the speech: I put it into English.

Then, of course, during the Carter Presidency, I was useful to the movement because some of my classmates were members of the Administration. They were people I'd gone to school with. One has to remember that I grew up as an Establishment figure in America. I went to boarding school, I went to Princeton, I went to Harvard. They were things I could draw on, although they were frequently misinterpreted by the Palestinians – some of them, I mean – who thought I "represented" America. When my book *The Question of Palestine* appeared, for example, the Popular Front weekly magazine ran a tremendous attack on me because I was supposed to be a representative of bourgeois this and that – all that formulaic bullshit. In any event, I was plunged totally into politics, simultaneously with my academic work, which was going on in parallel. They were joined, in a certain sense, in the middle 1970s when I wrote *Orientalism*. The book married the two things I was most interested in: literature and culture, on the one hand, and studies and analyses of power, on the other. From then, it continued pretty much unbroken until the autumn of 1991, when I resigned from the National Council.

ORIENTALISM & HUMANISM

RP: Perhaps we could ask you something about the character of this marriage of concerns in *Orientalism*. *Orientalism* is often read as a kind of counter-history of the European literary tradition, an exorcising of the political ghost of high literary humanism. On the other hand, the literary quality of the texts which are criticised politically is emphasised and affirmed. This has led some people to detect an ambivalence towards literary humanism in the work. After all, this is a tradition which not only affirms literary values, but has often gone so far as to identify them with human values. Is there still an ambivalence in *Orientalism* towards literary humanism?

Said: Yes. The heroes of the book, insofar as there are heroes (I can't think if there are any heroines, particularly),

the heroes are basically the novelists. People like Flaubert, like Nerval, some of whom were poets as well. There is an ambivalence, however. As Orwell said about Salvador Dali, it's possible to be a disgusting human being and a great draftsman, which Salvador Dali was. So you could be an imperialist and an orientalist, and also a great writer. That's really what I'm interested in, the co-existence of these two things. What does one do in the face of that? My own profession has been pretty consistent. The tradition has been to separate them completely, and to say, 'Well, we're not going to talk about this, we're just going to talk about that.' More and more I'm perceived as having become shrill about talking about them together.

RP: Isn't the mainstream position rather to *suppress* the politics in the name of the human side?

Said: Exactly.

RP: It's not really a separation ...

Said: ... no, it's not separating all the time ...

RP: ... an overriding, perhaps ...

Said: ... overriding. Yes. But it is a *form* of separating, in the sense that you won't talk about *this*, because *that's* much more important. I mean, even Raymond Williams, for example – Raymond Williams, as you know, I revere and loved, he was a great man – has this long chapter in *Culture and Society* on Carlyle. How can you read Carlyle the way he did? Even if it was 1950 or whenever. Carlyle wrote *The Nigger Question* in the 1840s, and it was an appalling piece of racist horror. If you look through his work it's everywhere. The same is true of Ruskin. For all that he was a great influence on people like Gandhi and Tolstoy, Ruskin was a profound imperialist. He really thought that England should colonise the world – and actually said so! So it's not a question of looking for it. It's there. You just have to read it. So you're right. The overriding of one discourse by another is what it's all been about. And I'm interested not only in the way the two co-exist, but the way in which you can read the works with these concerns in mind and, by a process of what I call contrapuntal reading, transform the works into the enabling conditions of a decolonising critique.

This is what I try to do more explicitly in my new book, *Culture and Imperialism*. It becomes possible, for instance, to read *Mansfield Park* from the point of view of the Antigua plantation of the Bertrams, instead of reading it from the point of view of Mansfield Park. And we can see in that reading the origins not only of the slave revolt in Santo Domingo, but the whole tradition of Caribbean writing that comes out of it: the work of C.L.R. James and Lamming and Eric Williams. At this point, in my opinion, *Mansfield Park* becomes an even more interesting novel, even greater for containing within itself this possibility of reaccommodating it to something else, to another kind of reading, to a different interest. It becomes part of another trajectory, which is not that of the English novel. It becomes part of the Caribbean thing.

RP: Yet *Mansfield Park* remains the novel to read. In other words, you stick with the canonical works.

Said: Yes, of course, because I'm culturally very conservative. There are good books, and there are less good books.

RP: But there could be several reasons for that. One could say that these books are the books in which certain historical experiences are most significantly sedimented, and put forward a purely strategic defence of them: these are the books which constitute the canon in this culture, and so this is the place we're going to start to unravel it. But you want to say something rather stronger than that it's a strategic starting place?

Said: Yes. *Mansfield Park*, while not my favourite Austen novel, is a remarkable piece of work in its own right. That's where the stakes are highest, in the argument from quality. Because Austen was profoundly implicated in her own society, or a segment of it, it enabled her to see – by virtue of that very limited vision – the necessity of an empire. In my opinion, in an uncompromising way. And that is consistent; despite the fact that Jane Austen has been reclaimed by feminists. The feminism of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* is totally untroubled by the slavery and by the sugar plantation. I think one has to note that.

RP: But is the quality of the book intrinsically connected to the possibility of its contrapuntal reading?

Said: I think so, but it would obviously require more than just asserting it to prove this sort of thing. One doesn't have time to do everything. Take *Heart of Darkness* as another example. *Heart of Darkness*, whatever you think about it politically, is the novel about Africa. Many African novelists, including Chinua Achebe, who attacked it so, felt the need to engage with it. Not because it's a racist text, but because it is the most formidable work of the imagination by a European about Africa. It has that quality. It's strategically central because it has that quality. The same is true of *The Tempest*. And what one should add at this moment is the word 'pleasure'. It's not just strategy, it's not just quality, but it is a work in which one can take aesthetic pleasure. Perhaps for some of those reasons, but also because it's a wonderful book to read. I don't by any means put down or denigrate or minimise the role of the enjoyment of the work. One of the arguments I make in my new book about such works as *Kim* – why they're so important by the end of the nineteenth century – is that Kim, the character, is an instrument for Kipling being able to enjoy being in India. Nevertheless, you can't remove from that the imperial quality: that he's there in the service of the British Empire. In the end, he becomes a loyal servant in the great game. But up until that point the major quality, I think, of *Kim* for Kipling is enjoyment – a certain kind of imperial pleasure.

RP: The imperial pleasure is to be able to move across boundaries. So isn't it a pleasure that's intrinsically politically implicated?

Said: True, but other people can also move across boundaries. You'd be surprised. What is interesting is that Kipling is enjoying the pleasures of the Empire in such a way that he is completely blind to what is taking place at the time: namely, the emergence of an Indian national movement. He is blind to this other factor, this other element, forming, emerging, and ultimately overcoming the Empire.

RP: One could say that the subtleties of the text are precisely where it's not blind to the emergence of the national movement.

Said: There are two places in the novel where Kipling talks about changes in India; most of the time he represents a changeless India. One of them is the episode with the old soldier about the Great Mutiny. And he represents it as a temporary madness that came over the Indians. So he saw it, he transformed it into something else, and off he went. He saw it, but he didn't take note of it – as what it was. The second place is later on, when one of the women, the widow of Shamlegh, says that we don't want these new English people who are coming. (It's a reference to the educated young colonial hands, like Forster's Ronnie Heaslop, twenty five years later.) We prefer the old style. There is a sense in which, according to Kipling, the Indians prefer traditional orientalist, like Colonel Creighton. So he registers a sense of what the Indians may want, but he doesn't linger over it, and he transmutes it into something else, and off he goes. I don't think there are any other subtleties there, of that sort, that openly refer to the political situation.

RP: It sounds like an opposite example to *Mansfield Park*. There you were saying there's a place in the text from which you can reread the text, but here there isn't another place.

Said: No, there is another place. There is a national movement. For example (it's an important detail), this old soldier who was in the English Army, whom Kim and the Llama visit, is described by Kipling as revered in his village. Now, to my way of thinking, given my own background, somebody like that who collaborated is very likely *not* to be revered. He's likely to be an outcast. So one focuses on that.

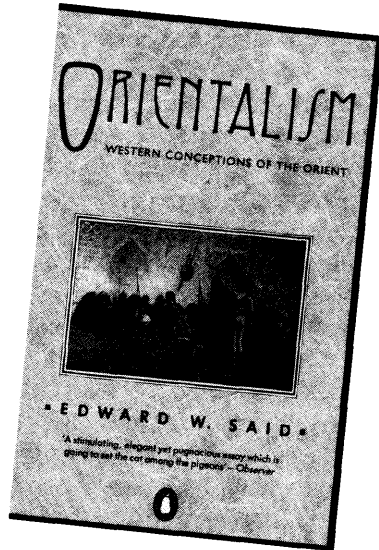
RP: *Orientalism* drew upon a Foucauldian perspective, but that was framed by a Gramscian theory of hegemony. Are there not great differences and tensions between these respective theorisations of power?

Said: Very much so.

RP: Have you continued to maintain that dual perspective?

Said: No. I won't say I abandoned Foucault, but I'd say I'd gotten what there was to be gotten out of Foucault by about the time *Discipline and Punish* appeared, in the mid-1970s. The discovery I made about Foucault, about which I wrote in a small essay called 'Foucault and the Imagination of Power', was that, despite the fact that he seemed to be a

theorist of power, obviously, and kept referring to resistance, he was really the *scribe* of power. He was really writing about the victory of power. I found very little in his work, especially after the second half of *Discipline and Punish*, to help in resisting the kinds of administrative and disciplinary pressures that he described so well in the first part. So I completely lost interest in his work. The later stuff on the subject I just found very weak and, to my way of thinking, uninteresting.



I was one of the first in America to teach Gramsci, but there are problems in teaching and talking about Gramsci. First of all, the English translation of the *Prison Notebooks* was based on a corrupt text, and conveyed a very false impression. Even when I was working on *Orientalism* I discovered mistakes in it. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, since it's now possible to read a very good text – the Gerratana four-volume critical edition of the *Prison Notebooks* with a huge apparatus – Gramsci was an inveterate note-writer. He never wrote a consistent piece, except the *Southern Question*, which I make great use of in my new book. It's very hard to derive from Gramsci's work a consistent political and philosophical position. There's a bit of this, a bit of that – mostly, I think, in the tradition of Vico and Leopardi, a kind of Italian cosmopolitan pessimism; along with his tremendous involvement in the Italian working-class movement. But beyond that, methodologically it's very difficult to 'use' him.

RP: The concept of hegemony is of use, perhaps...

Said: Yes, it has a kind of gross fascination, a gross applicability, which I still make use of. But as to exactly what it means ...? Its most interesting quality is the idea of mutual siege. Hegemony and what is required to mount a counter-hegemonic movement. But that can't be done theoretically; it has to be part of a large political movement, what he called an ensemble. That I find tremendously useful. But beyond that it's difficult to make instrumental use of him.

RP: In left political culture, there have been at least two quite different uses of Gramsci. One based on a cultural

reading of him, the other on what one might call the Turin Gramsci, which is about organic intellectuals, working-class organisations, etc. Are you drawing on both of these?

Said: I think one has to. For example, in the *Southern Question*, he draws attention to the role of somebody called Gobetti, who was a kind of northern intellectual who became a southern activist. What that's all about is overcoming political and geographical divisions between states, between actualities. What Gramsci was doing was improvising in a highly particularised local situation (Italian politics in the early 1920s) in order to put together a counter-hegemonic movement of some sort. That's what interests me most about him. In my opinion, the central thing about Gramsci's thought, which hasn't really been focused on enough, is that it's basically geographical. He thinks in terms of territories, in terms of locales, which is tremendously important to me. Maybe I got it from Gramsci. I was struck by the difference between Gramsci, with his focus on geography, and Lukács's focus on temporality, where the Hegelian tradition is so strong. The materialist tradition, the pessimistic materialist tradition in Italy, is all about place. It's tremendously undogmatic, tremendously unabstract. You can always find applications to the Italian situation. Most of the theoretical stuff that one reads in left periodicals today – and for the last ten years, maybe more – is so vague, so out of touch with any political movement of any consequence.

RP: The way you're talking about Gramsci here seems to be in tension with the kind of things you were saying earlier in relation to Austen, about the qualities of the humanist literary tradition.

Said: Why? Gramsci was a literary humanist. His training was in philology and he was passionately interested in Italian and other forms of literature. He read omnivorously. I think there's been a mistake of putting in opposition the humanistic and the political, or radical, or whatever. There's a much longer tradition of the two feeding off each other. If you look at Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, for example, running throughout are example after example of people like Blake, of poets and writers, of the radical movements' use of Shakespeare. I don't think there's this necessary opposition, which goes back, in my opinion, to some phony or factitious Althusserian opposition. It's possible to imagine a literary humanism that is not mandarin, disembodied, or scornful of politics. One can see it actually very much involved in politics. There's a whole tradition of Caribbean writing which, as C.L.R. James says, never had any other background. We're not talking about Africa, we're talking about the Caribbean – it's a transported population. This is its background; precisely these Western humanistic – and political – ideas. So it doesn't trouble me, what you call this tension.

RP: Foucault and Gramsci provided you with alternative theoretical approaches to literary objects that go beyond certain methodologically narrow stances to-

wards the text. They make different kinds of theoretical bridge between texts and their contexts, readings and practices, etc. However, when you come to reject the Foucauldian position because of its problematic, all-pervasive view of power, and you say that Gramsci is to be read only tactically – he doesn't give you a theoretical framework – this seems to open up something of a methodological vacuum. Do you worry about this? Or do you think that other people are worrying too much about having the right theoretical framework?

Said: Yes, I think so. Theory has become a substitute. From my perspective, theory is really not interesting as a subject in and of itself – to write endlessly refined accounts of some theory or other. (I make exceptions. Adorno strikes me as interesting for his own sake, for reasons that none of the books on Adorno have ever touched, namely because of his grounding in music. That's what's great about Adorno. Not so much what he has to say about administered society, or the conquest of nature.) But what's happened, in the years since I wrote *Beginnings* in the early '70s, is that theory has become a subject in and of itself. It has become an academic pursuit of its own. And I am totally impatient with it. Why? Because what has been neglected in the process is the historical study of texts, which to me is much more interesting. Firstly, because there are many more opportunities for genuine discovery; and secondly, because political and cultural issues can be made much clearer in terms of comparable issues in our own time. The question of oppression, of racial oppression, the question of war, the question of human rights – all these issues ought to belong together with the study of literary and other forms of texts; as opposed to the massive, intervening, institutionalised presence of theoretical discussion.

ORIENTALISM & FEMINISM

RP: Sticking with *Orientalism*, one critic, Jane Miller, in *The Seductions of Theory*, has pointed to the way in which you use all those terms with feminine associations in the discussion of Orientalism, and they are critical terms. Feminism does have a very ambiguous presence in the book here.

Said: Yes, it does. There's no question about it. What I was doing in *Orientalism*, twenty years ago when I was writing it, was pointing out two things: the extraordinary degree to which the Orient had become feminised by male writers in Europe; and the way in which the women's movement in the West was hand in glove with the imperialist movement. It was not a deterrent. It's only very recently – I would say in the last four or five years – that the questions of race and gender have been joined, in a historical and theoretical way – as opposed to just gender. That's an ongoing discussion, which at the time of *Orientalism* I didn't feel to be a part of the subject that I was dealing with. I think Miller is absolutely right, but it's very interesting that those critiques of *Orientalism* which are now being made were not made then! What is the role of feminism in the orientalism of a field like music or anthropology, for example? It's very

complicated, very troubling, and it's only just come up: I would say in the last three or four years, in discussions at the American Anthropological Association, and various other places. The engagement's only just begun.

RP: Recent feminist scholarship directly related to *Orientalism* has supported either a cultural nationalist position or a women's rights position. What do you make of these kinds of arguments?

Said: For me, they've become very interesting recently, in the last year. Just looking at the Middle East, there's been a sudden efflorescence of quite complex and interesting work on, for example, women's role in Islam and Islamic society. A new book by Leila Ahmad, which was published by Yale three or four months ago, has not yet received a single review in the USA. Nobody wants to touch it, it's too complicated, quite a troubling view of the whole question. A mass of material is now coming out. In the past we had Nawal al-Saadawi and a few others. But very little. Then of course there are the anthologies – *Let Women Speak, Islamic Women Speaking* – and the translation of women's texts from the part of the world I know best – the Islamic and Arab world. However, most important of all for me are not these theoretical questions, but the emergence here and there of a serious, politically effective, women's movement. That's what it's all about in the end. There is a movement and there is a literature now in the Middle East itself as part of the general struggle against the status quo – which is appalling – in places like Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Tunisia, Lebanon, and, from my point of view, especially in Palestine. The role of women in the Intifada is extraordinarily avant garde. So the situation is changing. It's very different from what it was ten years ago, certainly twenty years ago. And for me it's mainly interesting because of the oppositional quality of the women's movement, asserting a set of rights for women essentially denied them by authorities who purport to use the arguments of the Sharia, the Quran ...

RP: Do you feel that you've taken on board these kinds of discussion in your new book?

Said: Well, I was very interested. But the literature is still small. You get into another problem: what is the relationship between the women's movement and nationalism? In the early days of the national movement in places like Indonesia, India, Egypt, where there were pioneering women's movements, these were basically nationalist movements. They were thought of as part of the general struggle against the white man. I had a striking illustration of the difference between that and the present movement when last year I went to South Africa. I was invited by the University of Cape Town to give a lecture called The Academic Freedom Lecture. Because of the boycott, I had to be cleared by the ANC, which I was, and I gave a seminar at the ANC headquarters and at various other places. In Johannesburg, the first talk I gave was at an Islamic centre in Linasia, which is an Asian township, mostly Muslim. I gave a talk about Palestine, which is what they wanted to hear about. Then I was told, 'We've listened to you, now

you listen to us.' Which I thought was a fabulous notion, since usually visitors give a lecture and leave. So I heard somebody who spoke about schooling, about legal changes, violence, prison conditions, etc. There was a woman who stood up, whose name I'll never forget, Rohanna Adams: a Muslim name and a Christian last name – fantastic. She was the only one not to use the *Bismilrahimrahmanulrahim*, which is the statement of faith which Muslims use, and which in South Africa and throughout the Islamic world is sometimes a revolutionary, sometimes a reactionary, thing to say. In the former case, you're saying, 'Islam is my guide against you, the oppressors, apartheid,' etc. In places like Saudi Arabia it means loyalty to the king. In Algeria it was used against the French: Islam as a political force. She was the only one not to do that. It was her way of not getting sucked into the struggle against apartheid again. She said, 'all right, we're struggling against apartheid, but there's still the problem of women. You haven't addressed it, any of you.' (Pointing to them all, accusingly.) 'You try to put us to one side,' and indeed they did. They had the hall arranged so that the women were on one side and the men on the other – talking against apartheid. She said that we have to deal with this.

So, it's a completely different type of women's movement where there's a veering off from nationalism. There's a general discovery – and the women's movement is one of the places where this discovery has occurred – that nationalism has become the catch-all for the *oppression* by the new class of minorities: women, religious and ethnic groups,

and so on and so forth. The great virtue of the women's movement in the Occupied Territory in Palestine is not only against the Israelis, but against the so-called Islamic Arab oppression of women. But it's only beginning now to do that. It's changing.

AFTER ORIENTALISM

RP: Our final question about *Orientalism* concerns your relation to some of the work that it provoked, which goes under the heading of 'colonial discourse theory'. People often identify *Orientalism* as the founding text of a new theoretical genre. But that genre is then frequently articulated in terms of poststructuralist theory, which is quite different in many ways from the theoretical assumptions and practices of your book.

Said: Absolutely.

RP: It is also associated, at times, with a political tendency with which, rather surprisingly, you have occasionally been associated by your critics: 'orientalism in reverse', or a simple inversion of the hierarchical relationship between the West and its other. What these two things have in common is a fixation on the binary opposition between the West and its 'other', and a tendency to homogenise both categories, thereby losing any kind of historical or geo-political specificity: in the first case, by refusing to go beyond the pure negativity of the deconstructive stance; in the latter, by politically lumping together all kinds of very different colonial relations. What is your view of these developments?

Said: Where I think *Orientalism* was useful was in those works that looked at the cultural component of forms of domination as giving rise to Africanist, Indianist, Japanesist, etc. types of discourses; as having, in a very narrow sense, played an important constitutive role in talking about those places. You could no longer look at, say, descriptions by nineteenth century explorers of Africa as if they were just seeing what they saw. There was the notion of a collaborative enterprise having to do with the domination of a region. *Orientalism* gave rise to studies of that sort, which I think were salutary. However, it also gave rise to a bad thing, which I didn't intend, and which I thought I had dealt with, but obviously didn't: the problem of homogenisation. For example, in the Arab world I'm read by many people as a champion of Islam, which is complete nonsense. I wasn't trying to defend Islam. I was simply talking about a very specific form of activity: representation. The problem then becomes (as some have suggested): you didn't say what the true Orient really was. So what I try to do in my new book (which I didn't do in the other one) is to talk not only about imperialism, but also decolonisation, and the movements that emerged from the Third World – all kinds of opposition and resistance.

There is a focus on what I view as the opposition within the nationalist movements – nationalism versus liberation. There's nationalism which leads to the national bourgeoisie, separatist, statist, national security: the problem of the



pathology of the Third-World state. But there's always the opportunity for the alternative, what I call liberation. 'There's room for all at the rendez-vous of victory' (C.L.R. James quoting Césaire) – is a very important phrase for me. It's impossible to talk about the sides of the opposition between oriental and occidental separately. I talk about what I call overlapping areas of experience. The whole point is that imperialism was not of one side only, but of two sides, and the two are always involved in each other. That's where the contrapuntal method comes in. Instead of looking at it as a melody on top and just a lot of silly accompaniment down here, or silence, it's really like a polyphonic work. In order to understand it, you have to have this concept of overlapping territories – interdependent histories, I call them. That's the only way to talk about them, in order to be able to talk about liberation, decolonisation, and the integrative view, rather than the separatist one. I'm totally against separatism.

As for Orientalism in reverse, there's a literature on this throughout the Islamic world – 'Occidentosis': all the evils in the world come from the West. It's a well-known genre that I find on the whole extremely tiresome and boring. And I've separated myself from it and from what I call nativism. I'll give you a perfect example of it. In 1962 or '63, Soyinka, an advanced intellectual, publishes a withering critique of the great nativist concept of negritude. He attacks Sengor, saying that Sengor's idea is really a way of giving in to the concept of the inferior black man. It's the other half of the dialectical opposition. Excellent. In 1991, in his own magazine, *Transition*, which has been re-established in America with Skip Gates, he writes a tremendous attack on the African political scientist Ali Mazrui, who is a Muslim from Kenya. The essence of the attack on Ali Mazrui is that he is not a pure African. He's an Islamicised and Arabized African. So the integrative liberationist African, twenty years later, in Nigeria, has become a nativist, attacking a man for not being black enough! – the man who had

attacked negritude. Those reversals are part of the political situation.

The same thing operates in the Salman Rushdie case. In the Islamic world I've been vociferous in attacking the banning of the book. It's the result, firstly, of the absence of any secular theory of any consequence that is capable of mobilising people, that is understandable by the people who are laying their lives on the line; and secondly, of the absence of organisation. There is no effective secular organisation, anywhere, in the fields in which we work, except the state. I mean secular political organisation. That's part of the failure which I lament so much. So there is this tremendous thing about authenticity and ethnic particularity. The politics of identity is the problem: the failure to take account of, and accept, the migratory quality of experience; that everybody is a migrant or an exile. In England, for example, the people who have been most vociferous against the *Satanic Verses* are migrants who want to assert their authenticity in an environment which has been basically hostile to them. Rather than saying, 'our experience is very much like that of the Palestinians, very much like that of the Bangladeshis'; instead of seeing it as something beyond the binary oppositional thing, 'us versus them', and therefore being able to see it in different terms, there's this obsession about returning to yourself: only in the community, and the purer form of the community, is my salvation – which is, I think, a form of perdition. It's the end of the best things about our civilisation, and it's something that I completely oppose. The marginalisation, the ghettoisation, the reification of the Arab, through orientalism and other processes, cannot be answered by simple assertions of ethnic particularity, or glories of Arabic, or returning to Islam and all the rest of it. The only way to do it is to get engaged, and to plunge right into the heart of the heart, as it were. That's the only answer; not these retreats.

INTELLECTUALS & THEIR CONSTITUENCIES

RP: The idea of secularity plays an important role in your work, particularly as a way of defining intellectual practice. Do you think the term 'secular intellectual' bears enough critical force in the current situation? It seems an almost nineteenth-century category, insofar as it sets up the oppositional role of the intellectual solely in terms of a division between the theological and the secular. Secularity seems to define a space, an intellectual space which is oppositional to those who won't allow you to occupy it, but inside the secular space many different oppositional positions would seem to be possible. Is there a specific oppositional content here beyond the secularity?

Said: As you said, it goes back to the secular versus the religious. That's clear. And the space is the space of history as opposed to the space of the sacred or the divine. The second point I take from Gramsci. He wrote a letter, I think it was in 1921, where he says that the great achievement of his generation, partly acting under the aegis of Croce, was that they were involved in the conquest of civil society,

sho	jha	Tsha
so		Ja
uang the nasal N	nya	J-ha
gho the aspi- rated G	ta	Nya
go	t-ha	Ta
kho the aspi- rated K	da	T-ha
ko	d-ha	Da
bho the aspi- rated B	na	D-ha
bo	ta	Na
pho the aspi- rated P	t-ha	Ta
Po	da	T-ha
No		Da
dho the aspi- rated D	d-ha	D-ha
do		Na
tho	na nasal	Pa
to	pa	P-ha
ano	p-ha	Ba
dho	ba	B-ha
do	b-ha	Ma
khio	ma	Ya
ho	ya	Ka
		La

taking it away from mythological ideas of one sort or another: he called it the secular conquest of civil society. What interested me was that he also makes the point that the conquest is never over. You keep having to reappropriate as much as possible, which is otherwise going to be taken back. It's a constant re-excavation of public space. Beyond this, we have to describe functions of the secular intellectual. (I don't want to get into the whole question of general versus special, which is, I think, a phony set of categories invented by Foucault. I reject that.)

Instead, I prefer various functions, of which one, for example, is bibliographical: where the role of the secular intellectual, in opposition, is in relation to approved sources and documentation. The role of the secular intellectual is to provide alternatives: alternative sources, alternative readings, alternative presentation of evidence. Then there is what I call an epistemological function: the rethinking of, let's say, the whole opposition of 'us' versus the Islamic world, or 'us' and Japan. What does 'us' mean in this context? What does 'Islam' mean in this context? I think only intellectuals can fulfill these functions, in opposition, that is to say, in contravention of the approved *idée reçue*, whatever that happens to be. Then I see a moral function, a dramatic function: the performance in particular places of a type of intellectual operation that can dramatise oppositions, present the alternative voice, and so on. So it's by no means an open category. It encompasses a plurality of particular things and activities.

RP: So the secular intellectual is inherently critical and oppositional? Yours is a more Sartrean position ...

Said: Yes, exactly.

RP: ... but not so close to Gramsci, where the distinction between 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals is so central?

Said: No, I think it is. Part of the problem is that the categories of organic and traditional intellectuals in Gramsci are fantastically unclear, and difficult to make clear. The categories are simply not stable categories. At one time you could say that Matthew Arnold was an organic intellectual. When he wrote *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869, he had an affiliation with a particular class. But by the end of the century, he had become a traditional intellectual. People read his work as a kind of apology for culture, without any connection to anything except the Church.

RP: But with Gramsci, one has the sense of a particular audience; that he is addressing a specific audience, an ideal audience, even.

Said: Yes, all of this has to do with an audience, when I talk about a dramatic function. The difference is that I feel we all have different audiences in different constituencies. Just performing acts of routine solidarity, or mindless loyalty, strikes me as not interesting, not important. Although there may be a time for it. The great problem in essentially administered societies, the Western democracies, is precisely

the drowning out of the critical sense. That has to be opposed by the secular intellectual and the critical sense revised for various audiences, various constituencies.

RP: This question of intellectuals and their constituencies has been raised quite acutely in the American academy in recent years in ways that relate directly to some of the issues we have discussed regarding the reception of *Orientalism*: namely, in the debates about political correctness and the canon. These are debates about exclusion, about boundaries, about what is to be excluded and what included. The position you have taken in these debates looks like a fairly traditional liberal humanist one, of opening up the space, including more texts, but defending canonicity. There are two questions here. The first is that if the way the state works culturally is through exclusion (as you suggest), can you really expect the existing state to open itself up to all these things? The pure liberal state is a fiction of political theory. The second question derives from a piece you wrote in the *THES* where you ask: 'Who benefits from levelling attacks on the canon?' and reply: 'Certainly not the disadvantaged person or class, whose history, if you bother to read it at all, is full of evidence that popular resistance to injustice has always derived immense benefits from literature and culture in general, and very few from invidious distinctions between ruling class and subservient cultures.' This is a strong defence of the oppositional political possibilities of 'great texts'. But are such distinctions *always* invidious?

Said: I've never felt the canon to be imposing a set of restrictions on me. It never occurred to me that in either reading or teaching the canon I was like a servant at work in the orchard of some great ruling-class figure who employed me to do that. I took it as requiring a certain kind of attention, a certain kind of discipline. Because I didn't feel that restriction I felt the whole question of the canon – whether it was raised by its defenders or its opponents – to be a very limited one. Secondly, everything I said in that article, and thereafter, concerned not the role of the canon in the state, in the context of the state, but in the university. Now, in my view, the university is one of the last quasi-utopian spaces in modern society. And if it becomes a place for displacing one set of categories in order to put in their place another set of categories, if we're going to read aggressively one set of texts that were forbidden in the past and that are now possible, and we're going to forbid the texts that we read in the past in order to read these texts, I'm against the practice. That's not the answer. In America, the vogue might be for Afrocentrism to replace Eurocentrism. In the Islamic world it is to not read Western texts in order to read Islamic texts. I don't have to make that choice. If that's what it's all about, I'm off. I'm ag'in them both. Just as I'm against William Bennett and Bernard Lewis, and all these who keep telling us that we should only read Homer and Sophocles, I'm against the other ones who say, you'll only read texts by black people.

The question is: Are there open categories? That's really your question. I think there are. But they're not out there,

they're what you do. That's what it's all about. It's not about somebody saying: 'OK, Said, you can do anything you like.' That's not interesting. What is, is what you do in your individual practice as a teacher, a writer, an intellectual. What are the choices you make? Now, if your attitude is venerative, then that's stupid. I'm against that. I've spent a lot of time trying to show the limitations of that. If, on the other hand, your attitude is critical, I think that's what education is all about – to instil a critical sense, a kind of nasty, demanding, questioning attitude to everything that's put before you. But that by no means exempts you in the end from making judgements, from deciding what is good versus what is better, what is excellent, what is lousy. Questions of taste are very important. I don't derive the same pleasure reading a novel by a great novelist and a political pamphlet. It's a different kind of thing. So in the end it's not the categories that are open, it's the possibilities of political and intellectual work that are relatively open, if one knows how to take advantage of them.

RP: Can we return to your own position as a Palestinian working and living in the USA? In the introduction to a discussion with Salman Rushdie about your book, *After the Last Sky*, you talked about the dangers of being a 'cultural outsider'. Is that how you see yourself, as a cultural outsider?

Said: Yes, I do, without necessarily feeling alienated, if you see what I mean. You could be an outsider, and become more of an outsider, and cultivate your own garden, feel paranoia, all the rest of it. I've never felt that. I've felt discriminated against, but I've never felt that my situation was hopeless; that I couldn't do something to lessen my feelings of marginality. I've never lacked for opportunities to speak and write. Sometimes it hasn't been very good. A couple of years ago I was under a death threat, when some group was trying to kill me. I had to change the way I lived. And it's been very hard for me constantly to be on the defensive in a public situation, in the media, or even socially, in a place like New York, where people look at me and say, 'Oh yes, PLO terrorist.'

RP: Has that got worse since the Gulf War?

Said: No, it's pretty much the same. Just before the Gulf War, there was a horrific attack published in *Commentary* called 'The Professor of Terror' – it was completely libellous – which tried to prove that I plotted the murder of Jewish children and all this sort of thing. It was clearly reckless, designed to provoke me into starting a libel suit, which would tie me up for ten years, and prevent me from doing anything else. So I didn't even reply. Those things happen all the time. But you go on, and that's important. In the Arab world, I feel alienated for political reasons. I haven't been to Jordan or Lebanon in over ten years, for reasons that are entirely political. Most of these places have changed beyond recognition. So my own past is irrecoverable, in a funny sort of way. I don't really belong anywhere, but I've resolved that that's the way it is. It's OK. I don't mind so much. You don't have much choice

RP: Is it this sense of alienation from the Arab world that led you to resign from the National Council?

Said: I began to be dissatisfied with the tendencies of the Palestinian movement, in particular the PLO, to which I've always been loyal as an overall political authority, several years ago. During the summer of 1991, I was very involved in the preparations for the Madrid Conference. I knew a lot of the people on the West Bank, and since America became central, it was thought that my input would be useful. I thought the emphasis in the Arab world, and above all in the Palestinian movement, on the United States, which was the last superpower, was scandalous, a slavish kind of fawning, almost desperate, cap-in-hand, 'Help us, we rely on you', etc. When the United States has been the enemy of our people! I thought it was scandalous. It was very confusing to people, this sudden tilt towards America after the Gulf War. Because of the stupidities of what the PLO did during the Gulf War, there was a sudden dropping in the lap of America and accepting everything that they wanted, openly saying 'Only America can rescue us!' It confused people a great deal. They suddenly thought, 'what are we struggling about?' What happened after Madrid was that the situation on the West Bank and Gaza got *worse*, and it's getting worse every day. I was also unhappy with the mafia-like quality of the PLO, and I thought that Arafat, whom I've always been loyal to – he's a friend – I thought that his tenure had been too long. It's not been good for us. I began my critique in Arabic about three years ago, in 1989. They don't know where they're going. It's too in-grown.

RP: Inevitably, perhaps?

Said: Perhaps. But it's also important for independents, such as myself, to say openly what the problems are. One last point I want to make is that, talking about negotiations over the West Bank and Gaza really didn't affect me in a way, because I'm not from the West Bank and Gaza. I'm from what used to be called West Jerusalem. And there was no role forecast for those of us who are exiles. Four million Palestinians (many of them stateless) have no place to go. There are many hundred thousands in Lebanon, Syria, etc. They're not included in these negotiations. It's just about residents on the West Bank and Gaza. So it's their problem. Fine, they're doing a great job – let them go on doing it. And the third reason I stopped, which was very important to me, is that since I discovered I have an insidious and chronic blood disease, I decided I would like to visit Palestine. I tried to go once in 1988 and Shamir refused entry, because I was a member of the National Council. So the resignation makes it possible for me to do that. And in fact I'm going the day after tomorrow. I'm on my way, for the first time in almost forty-five years.

RP: When you go to the Arab world, do you see this as some kind of returning home, or is America now your home?

Said: No, I'm totally at home in both places. But I'm different, in a way. In the American context, I speak as an American and I can also speak as a Palestinian. But in neither case do I feel that I belong in a proprietary sense or, let us say, in an executive sense, to the central power establishment. I'm in the opposition in both places. And of course it means quite different things. If you're in opposition in Palestine, in the Palestinian context, it means that you support and help shape an emerging national consensus. I played, I thought, a relatively important role in 1988 at the National Council meeting in Algeria where I helped to draft some of the statements and involved myself in a lot of the discussions, pushing towards recognition of the Israelis (UN resolution 242) by two states, all of that—I was for that, because it seemed to me logical, because we had no ally, no strategic ally, and because I thought it was right. The Soviet representative had absolutely nothing to say. In fact he was very discouraging. He didn't want us to do that. He said 'lie low', etc. But I thought it was important to do that. So I did all of that. And as I said, I support the national consensus. On the other hand, I certainly didn't feel it something that I could deny myself. That if I felt something was wrong I should say it, and I said it.

For example, I've felt for almost fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years, that Palestinian policy in the United States is badly organised. The USA is not like an Arab country. It's not even like a European country. And they've taken no steps to deal with that. The important thing becomes: how you pursue your criticism. The venue becomes central. I would never speak to a Western press person, because, in that context, it is interpreted as an attack on the national movement, which I wouldn't do. But in the Arabic press, in Arabic, I would do it. But rarely without having spoken to Arafat first. In America I'm totally in the opposition. It's true, in effect, I've become some kind of Mister Palestine to a lot of commentators. But I have never been on television, or press, or any sort of forum in America, without always being on the defensive, or in the minority.

I was on a big Sunday morning programme once—I think it was the Brinkley show—and it was one of the key moments of the Intifada. People were getting killed and beaten and all the rest, and they actually showed a tape of it. The first question to me after the tape was: 'When are the Palestinians going to stop terrorism?' But when I give lectures now, political ones, since the Gulf War, and even during the Gulf War, I very rarely get hostile questions. It's quite extraordinary. Opinion has changed so much. The standard official Israeli position has simply nothing to recommend it any more. We've gone all the way, we've recognised them. We've said we want coexistence, we're willing to talk peace. Why then does the occupation con-

tinue? Why does the systematic persecution and oppression of Palestinians continue? That's been a tremendous change.

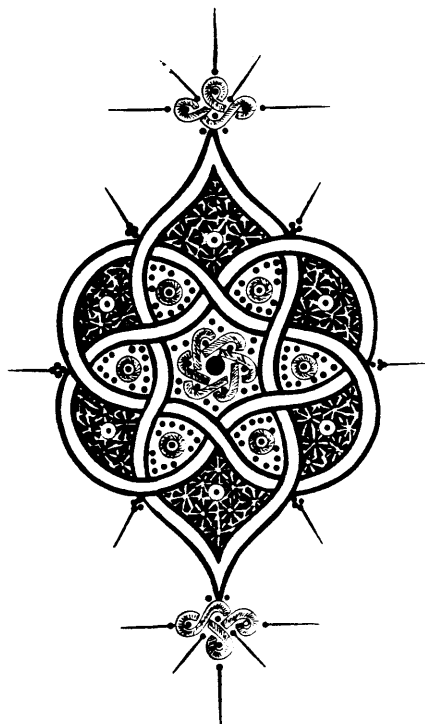
RP: Do you think the Gulf War was the turning point?

Said: No. During the Gulf War, I took a position which was very much against Saddam, but I was also opposed to American troops. I've always been against Saddam. The only time I ever went to Kuwait was in 1985 and I had a huge semi-public fight with a local luminary who was blathering on about what a great man Saddam was. This was in the middle of the Iran-Iraq War. And I said, 'Saddam's a murderer and a pig and a tyrant and a fascist, and you're

criminals, and fools,' and all the rest of it. And they said: 'Ah, we're giving them billions'—and they did, they gave him fifteen billion dollars. And I told them that he was going to be the end of them. During the first weeks after the Gulf Crisis the same luminary called me up and abused me over the phone, because he said people had told him that I had appeared on English television, and I hadn't been strong enough in defence of Kuwait. And I said, 'of course I've defended Kuwait. I've been opposed to the occupation, I've been opposed to Saddam, but I won't take the position that Saudi Arabia and your morally and politically bankrupt government and the Americans should now send troops in and start a war. There are many moves that can be made before that.' Two weeks later, he wrote a column in the leading Arab, Saudi paper, published in London, in which he wrote in Arabic: 'Why I invited the prominent Arab intellectuals to commit suicide.' And he mentioned me. He said, 'Said should

commit suicide because he's been a traitor to the Arabs and to Kuwait.'

During the Gulf War, my position was very different from the so-called official Palestinian position, such as it was. Basically, I opposed Iraq, I opposed the depredations of the Kuwaiti regime, I opposed Saudi policy, and I opposed the American position. I opposed the war. But I refused to fall into the position taken by people like Fred Halliday and Hans-Magnus Enzensberger—that in the war between imperialism and fascism you back imperialism. I was against them both. I think that was the honourable and only serious position to take. It could have been taken by more intellectuals in the West, but to their shame—partly because of anti-Arabism and anti-Islam, and the sort of things I talk about in *Orientalism*—they didn't. It's a scandal. It's a great block. What has the war accomplished? Saddam is still there, he's still killing Kurds, Shiites, he's killing everybody. And he may even be supported by the Saudis now. At the same time as they're supporting his overthrow, they're trying to buy him off, as they do everywhere throughout the Arab world.



RP: So your position was to maintain sanctions?

Said: Yes, to maintain UN sanctions, but also to maintain uniformity and consistency of positions, everywhere, not just with regard to Palestine. What about Cyprus? There are any number of UN resolutions on the Turkish invasion and partition of the country. One of the reasons I was very upset about the US position during the so-called peace process, the Madrid phase, was that it said the Palestinians should strip themselves of their right to representation. No liberation movement in history has ever done that. They nominate. They say: We pick the people, and not you, not the enemy. Secondly, I thought it was a classic mistake, typically imperial, that the United States should make this *its* peace process, with the Soviet Union. You notice – if you look at the letter of invitation to the Madrid Conference, the United Nations is specifically cited as excluded. The United States will oppose any initiative from the United Nations. So suddenly the United States, which had used the United Nations in the Gulf War, had banned it from the peace process! All of these things have to be said.

RP: In a television interview with you and Chomsky, during or immediately after the war, you talked about the persistence of orientalist attitudes. At the time, that explanatory framework seemed to miss the precision of the West's economic and military motives. The reference to orientalist discourses appeared almost superfluous in the face of that kind of precision.

Said: Maybe I'm overly sensitive to it, but I don't think a war like that could have been fought, paid for by Arabs against other Arabs with contempt towards the whole procedure of negotiating, without orientalism. This was not a war about aggression or anything like that. It was a war about cheap oil, and only Arabs have cheap oil: that combination has a particular kind of racial tinge to it. Nobody said – certainly not the Americans – that this is Arab oil for the Arabs, not just for the Kuwaiti royal family. These states – Saudi Arabia and Kuwait – are owned by families. There's no state in the world that's designated like Saudi Arabia – it's the House of Saud – they actually own the country. All of these anomalies were only possible, it seems to me, and produced contradictory and lying discourses about justice and aggression and all the rest of it, *because* they're Arab.

The United States has never supported human rights in the Arab world. I made a study of it. Every US position of importance, whether political or economic or military, in the Arab world has always been taken against human rights. They've opposed human rights for Palestinians, they've opposed human rights in the Gulf, they've opposed human rights in places like Syria, and so on and so forth. So I think you can't not talk about what we might call cultural attitudes. There was a kind of contempt. The other discourse – what you call economic and military – is not precise enough without this component. There was a massive campaign on the media in the United States: an anti-Arab and racist campaign, the demonisation of Saddam. In many ways, Iraq is the cultural centre of the Arab world. You didn't know that from the television screen, which just showed those

smart bombs going in over Baghdad. Saddam is not Baghdad. And to this day, not a word, not even a word about the people killed. This could only have been done with Arabs.

RP: Do you think that the American anti-war movement did enough?

Said: What anti-war movement? Of course not. I don't think it would have been hard to do it. I think there was a lot of popular ambivalence about the war. The left position was ambiguous. Not enough was made about the human catastrophe visited upon Iraq and the Gulf generally. Not enough was known about it, you see. A leading article on *Foreign Affairs* in December, just as the United States was about to go to war, began: 'Saddam is from a brittle country which has no connection to ideas, books, or culture.' This is a description of the country they're going to war against ... 'camel jockeys' and 'towel heads', whether they're for us or against us. The same kind of scorn was heaped on the Saudis, and they were the 'good Arabs' in this war. This was considered to be a war good for Israel, because Iraq was touted as the country most threatening to Israel. So there was really very little in the way of protest. To call it a movement would be wrong. It could have been a movement.

RP: What would it have needed?

Said: It would have needed organisation. Don't forget, this is the period after the collapse of socialism, of the left. There is no left in America, like there is a European left, or a British left.

RP: The British left was itself very confused.

Said: Well, if you were confused, what about America, where there is no real left? There are people who are sort of vaguely left, who are left by virtue of sentiment and providence – people like Irving Howe, for example, or Michael Walzer – who are great gurus of the left. Walzer was for the war. He thought it was a just war. The media was completely in cahoots with the government. It was one of the great satanic collaborations between the media and the government. You couldn't get on. Radio, however, was very important during the war, National Public Radio, and a few of the national networks carried a lot of stuff. But it doesn't have the power of television. It was a television war.

RP: In Baudrillard's terms?

Said: What did he say? Probably not.

RP: Baudrillard said it was a hyper-real non-event.

Said: Good old Baudrillard! For that I think he should be sent there. With a toothbrush and a can of Evian, or whatever it is he drinks.

*Interviewed by Anne Beezer and Peter Osborne
London, June 1992*