

TARIQ ALI

REMEMBERING

EDWARD SAID

1935–2003

EDWARD SAID was a longstanding friend and comrade. We first met in 1972, at a seminar in New York. Even in those turbulent times, one of the features that distinguished him from the rest of us was his immaculate dress sense: everything was meticulously chosen, down to the socks. It is almost impossible to visualize him any other way. At a conference in his honour in Beirut in 1997, Edward insisted on accompanying Elias Khoury and myself for a swim. As he walked out in his swimming trunks, I asked why the towel did not match. ‘When in Rome’, he replied, airily; but that evening, as he read an extract from the Arabic manuscript of his memoir *Out of Place*, his attire was faultless. It remained so till the end, throughout his long battle with leukaemia.

Over the last eleven years one had become so used to his illness—the regular hospital stays, the willingness to undergo trials with the latest drugs, the refusal to accept defeat—that one began to think him indestructible. Last year, purely by chance, I met Said’s doctor in New York. In response to my questions, he replied that there was no medical explanation for Edward’s survival. It was his indomitable spirit as a fighter, his will to live, that had preserved him for so long. Said travelled everywhere. He spoke, as always, of Palestine, but also of the unifying capacities of the three cultures, which he would insist had a great deal in common. The monster was devouring his insides but those who came to hear him could not see the process, and we who knew preferred to forget. When the cursed cancer finally took him the shock was intense.

His quarrel with the political and cultural establishments of the West and the official Arab world is the most important feature of Said's biography. It was the Six Day War of 1967 that changed his life—prior to that event, he had not been politically engaged. His father, a Palestinian Christian, had emigrated to the United States in 1911, at the age of sixteen, to avoid being drafted by the Ottomans to fight in Bulgaria. He became an American citizen and served, instead, with the us military in France during the First World War. Subsequently he returned to Jerusalem, where Edward was born in 1935. Said never pretended to be a poverty-stricken Palestinian refugee as some detractors later alleged. The family moved to Cairo, where Wadie Said set up a successful stationery business and Edward was sent to an elite English-language school. His teenage years were lonely, dominated by a Victorian father, in whose eyes the boy required permanent disciplining, and an after-school existence devoid of friends. Novels became a substitute—Defoe, Scott, Kipling, Dickens, Mann. He had been named Edward after the Prince of Wales but, despite his father's monarchism, was despatched for his education not to Britain but to the United States, in 1951. Said would later write of hating his 'puritanical and hypocritical' New England boarding school: it was 'shattering and disorienting'. Until then, he thought he knew exactly who he was, 'moral and physical flaws' and all. In the United States he had to remake himself 'into something the system required'.

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Nevertheless, he flourished in the Ivy League environment, first at Princeton and then Harvard where, as he later said, he had the privilege to be trained in the German philological tradition of comparative literature. Said began teaching at Columbia in 1963; his first book, on Conrad, was published three years later. When I asked him about it in New York in 1994, in a conversation filmed for Channel Four, he described his early years at Columbia between 1963 and 1967 as a 'Dorian Gray period':

TA: So one of you was the Comp Lit professor, going about his business, giving his lectures, working with Trilling and the others; yet at the same time, another character was building up inside you—but you kept the two apart?

es: I had to. There was no place for that other character to be. I had effectively severed my connexion with Egypt. Palestine no longer existed. My family lived partly in Egypt and partly in Lebanon. I was a foreigner in both

places. I had no interest in the family business, so I was here. Until 1967, I really didn't think about myself as anything other than a person going about his work. I had taken in a few things along the way. I was obsessed with the fact that many of my cultural heroes—Edmund Wilson, Isaiah Berlin, Reinhold Niebuhr—were fanatical Zionists. Not just pro-Israeli: they said the most awful things about the Arabs, in print. But all I could do was note it. Politically, there was no place for me to go. I was in New York when the Six Day War broke out; and was completely shattered. The world as I had understood it ended at that moment. I had been in the States for years but it was only now that I began to be in touch with other Arabs. By 1970 I was completely immersed in politics and the Palestinian resistance movement.¹

His 1975 work *Beginnings*—an epic engagement with the problems posed by the 'point of departure', which synthesized the insights of Auerbach, Vico, Freud with a striking reading of the modernist novel—and, above all, *Orientalism*, were the products of this conjuncture. Published in 1978, when Said was already a member of the Palestinian National Council, *Orientalism* combines the polemical vigour of the activist with the passion of the cultural critic. Like all great polemics, it eschews balance. I once told him that, for many South Asians, the problem with the early orientalist British scholars was not their imperialist ideology but, on the contrary, the fact that they were far too politically correct: overawed by the Sanskrit texts they were translating. Said laughed, and insisted that the book was essentially an attempt to undercut the more fundamental assumptions of the West in relation to the Arab East. The 'discourse'—Foucault was, alas, an important influence—of the Orient, constructed in France and Britain during the two centuries that followed Napoleon's conquest of Egypt, had served both as an instrument of rule and to shore up a European cultural identity, by setting it off against the Arab world.² He had deliberately concentrated on the exoticization, vulgarization and distortions of the Middle East and its culture for that

¹ This, and following quotes, are from *A Conversation with Edward Said*, a Bandung Films production. The programme was recorded in his Riverside Drive apartment, on a day so humid that Said removed his jacket and tie as the cameras began to roll—creating much merriment in the household.

² Thus Lord Cromer, British consul-general in Egypt for some quarter of a century after 1881: 'The European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of any ambiguity; he is a natural logician . . . The mind of the Oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry . . . He will often break down under the mildest process of cross-examination'. *Orientalism*, London 2003, p. 38.

reason. To portray imperialist suppositions as a universal truth was a lie, based on skewed and instrumentalist observations that were used in the service of Western domination.

Orientalism spawned a vast academic following. While Said was undoubtedly touched and flattered by the book's success, he was well aware of how it was misused and would often disclaim responsibility for its more monstrous offspring: 'How can anyone accuse me of denouncing "dead white males"? Everyone knows I love Conrad.' He would then go through a list of postmodernist critics, savaging each of them in turn for their stress on identity and hostility to narrative. 'Write it all down', I once told him. 'Why don't you?' came the reply. What we recorded was more restrained:

TA: The 1967 war radicalized you, pushed you in the direction of becoming a Palestinian spokesperson?

ES: Arab, at first, before Palestinian.

TA: And *Orientalism* grew out of that new commitment.

ES: I started to read, methodically, what was being written about the Middle East. It did not correspond to my experience. By the early seventies I began to realize that the distortions and misrepresentations were systematic, part of a much larger system of thought that was endemic to the West's whole enterprise of dealing with the Arab world. It confirmed my sense that the study of literature was essentially a historical task, not just an aesthetic one. I still believe in the role of the aesthetic; but the 'kingdom of literature'—'for its own sake'—is simply wrong. A serious historical investigation must begin from the fact that culture is hopelessly involved in politics. My interest has been in the great canonical literature of the West—read, not as masterpieces that have to be venerated, but as works that have to be grasped in their historical density, so they can resonate. But I also don't think you can do that without liking them; without caring about the books themselves.

Culture and Imperialism, published in 1993, extended the core arguments of *Orientalism* to describe a more general pattern of relationships between the metropolitan West and its overseas territories, beyond that of Europe and the Middle East. Written in a different political period, it attracted some vituperative attacks. There was a celebrated exchange in the *Times Literary Supplement* with Ernest Gellner—who thought Said should give 'at least some expression of gratitude' for imperialism's role as vehicle of modernity—in which neither side took prisoners. Later,

when Gellner attempted a reconciliation of sorts, Said was unforgiving; hatred must be pure to be effective and, here as elsewhere, he always gave as good as he got.

But by now, debates on culture had been overshadowed by events in Palestine. When I asked if the year 1917 meant anything to him, he replied without hesitation: ‘Yes, the Balfour Declaration’. Said’s writings on Palestine have a completely different flavour from anything else he wrote, passionate and biblical in their simplicity. This was his cause. In *The End of the Peace Process, Blaming the Victims* and some half-dozen other books, in his *al-Ahram* columns and his essays in this journal and the *London Review of Books*, the flame that had been ignited in 1967 burned ever brighter. He had helped a generation to understand the real history of Palestine and it was this position, as the true chronicler of his people and their occupied homeland, that won him respect and admiration throughout the world. The Palestinians had become the indirect victims of the European Judeocide of the Second World War; but few politicians in the West seemed to care. Said pricked their collective conscience and they did not like him for it.

Anti-Oslo

Two close friends whose advice he had often sought—Ibrahim Abu-Lughod and Eqbal Ahmad—had died within a few years of each other, in 1999 and 2001. Said missed them greatly, but their absence only made him more determined to continue his literary onslaught against the enemy. Though he had served for fourteen years as an independent member on the PNC, and helped to polish and redraft Arafat’s address to the UN General Assembly in 1984, he became increasingly critical of the lack of strategic vision that typified most of the Palestinian leadership. Writing in the immediate aftermath of what he termed the ‘fashion-show vulgarities’ of Arafat and Rabin’s handshake on the White House lawn, Said described the Oslo Accords—imposed on the vanquished by the United States and Israel, after the Gulf War of 1991—as ‘an instrument of surrender, a Palestinian Versailles’ offering only shrivelled Bantustans in exchange for a series of historic renunciations. Israel, meanwhile, had no reason to let go as long as Washington supplied it with arms and funds.³ (Arafat’s lieutenant Nabil Shaath,

³ *London Review of Books*, 21 October 1993.

echoing *Orientalism's* more reactionary critics, responded: 'He should stick to literary criticism. After all, Arafat would not deign to discuss Shakespeare'.) History has vindicated Said's analysis. One of his most scorching attacks on Arafat's leadership, published in 2001 in these pages and in *al-Ahram*, denounced Oslo as a mere repackaging of the occupation, 'offering a token 18 per cent of the lands seized in 1967 to the corrupt, Vichy-like authority of Arafat, whose mandate has essentially been to police and tax his people on Israel's behalf':

The Palestinian people deserve better. We have to say clearly that with Arafat and company in command, there is no hope . . . What the Palestinians need are leaders who are really with and of their people, who are actually doing the resisting on the ground, not fat cigar-chomping bureaucrats bent on preserving their business deals and renewing their VIP passes, who have lost all trace of decency or credibility . . . We need a united leadership capable of thinking, planning and taking decisions, rather than grovelling before the Pope or George Bush while the Israelis kill his people with impunity . . . The struggle for liberation from Israeli occupation is where every Palestinian worth anything now stands.⁴

Could Hamas provide a serious alternative? 'This is a protest movement against the occupation', Said told me:

In my opinion, their ideas about an Islamic state are completely inchoate, unconvincing to anybody who lives there. Nobody takes that aspect of their programme seriously. When you question them, as I have, both on the West Bank and elsewhere: 'What are your economic policies? What are your ideas about power stations, or housing?', they reply: 'Oh, we're thinking about that.' There is no social programme that could be labelled 'Islamic'. I see them as creatures of the moment, for whom Islam is an opportunity to protest against the current stalemate, the mediocrity and bankruptcy of the ruling party. The Palestinian Authority is now hopelessly damaged and lacking in credibility—like the Saudis and Egyptians, a client state for the us.

Behind the reiterated Israeli demands that the Authority crack down on Hamas and Islamic Jihad, he detected 'the hope that there will be something resembling a Palestinian civil war, a gleam in the eyes of the Israeli military. Yet in the final months of his life he could still celebrate the Palestinians' stubborn refusal to accept that they were, as the IDF Chief of Staff had described them, 'a defeated people', and saw signs for a more creative Palestinian politics in the National Political Initiative led

⁴ NLR II, September–October 2001.

by Mostapha Barghuti: "The vision here is not a manufactured provisional state on 40 per cent of the land, with the refugees abandoned and Jerusalem kept by Israel, but a sovereign territory liberated from military occupation by mass action involving Arabs and Jews wherever possible."⁵

With his death, the Palestinian nation has lost its most articulate voice in the Northern hemisphere, a world where, by and large, the continuous suffering of the Palestinians is ignored. For official Israelis, they are *untermenschen*; for official Americans, they are all terrorists; for the venal Arab regimes they are a continuing embarrassment. In his last writings, Said vigorously denounced the war on Iraq and its many apologists. He argued for freedom, from violence and from lies. He knew that the dual occupation of Palestine and Iraq had made peace in the region even more remote. His voice is irreplaceable, but his legacy will endure. He has many lives ahead of him.

⁵ *London Review of Books*, 19 June 2003.