

EDWARD SAID "SECULAR CRITICISM" (1983)

Said draws a distinction between his own approach to cultural criticism and what he describes as the purely text-oriented and, thus, ahistorical approach of other American critics such as the Yale School of Deconstruction. Said is of the view that

texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted. (607)

The relationship between text and context is not one of "representation" (617) but of "acquisition and appropriation" (618). Critics such as the Gramscian Marxist Raymond Williams teach us, Said writes, "to read in a different way and to remember that for every poem or novel in the canon there is a social fact being requisitioned for the page, a human life engaged, a class suppressed or elevated" (618). What is important is less what the texts in question *represent* than "what they *are* as the result of contested social and political relationships" (618). In other words, Said has in mind the questions posed by Foucault at the end of "What is an Author?" which, in his view, ought to replace the standard questions posed by the critic: "what are the modes of existence of this discourse?" (148). "Where does it come from; how is it circulated; who controls it?" (148).

Evidently gesturing to Foucault in particular, Said is of the view that culture is tantamount to a "system of exclusions" (611)

legislated from above but enacted throughout its polity, by which such things as anarchy, disorder, irrationality, inferiority, bad taste, and immorality are identified, then deposited outside the culture and kept there by the power of the State and its institutions. For if it is true that culture is, on the one hand, a positive doctrine of the best that is thought and known, it is also on the other a differentially negative doctrine of all that is not best. (611)

Said cites the work of Foucault in this regard, to be precise, the latter's demonstration of "how certain alterities, certain Others have been kept silent, outside or--in the case of penal discipline and sexual repression--domesticated for use inside the culture" (611). In short, the dialectic of self-fortification and self-confirmation by which culture achieves its hegemony over society and the State is based on a constantly practised differentiation of self from what it believes to be not itself. And this differentiation is frequently performed by setting the valorized culture over the Other. (611)

Arguing that such exclusionary acts may be fundamental to all cultures, Said's focus is on the ethnocentric and often racist history of European culture, especially during and since the heyday of imperialism in the nineteenth century: the

entire history of nineteenth century European thought is filled with such discriminations as these, made between what is fitting for us and what is fitting for them, the former designated as inside, in place, common, belonging, in a word *above*, the latter who are designated as outside, excluded, aberrant, inferior, in a word *below*. . . . The large cultural-national designation of European culture as the privileged norm carried with it a formidable battery of other distinctions between ours and theirs, between proper and improper, European and non-European, higher and lower: they are to be found everywhere in such subjects and quasi-subjects as linguistics, history, race theory, philosophy, anthropology, and even biology. (612)

Hence, Said points out, the frequent obsession of "culture" (611) "with an aggressive sense of nation, home, community, and belonging" (611).

Within this general schema, Said conceives of the role of critics such as himself as very

much an "oppositional" (621) or "ironic" (621) one, one attentive to the exclusionary acts alluded to earlier. The critic's relationship to his or her culture is one of "distance" (613) rather than "conformity and belonging" (613). Nevertheless, the critic's relationship to his/her particular socio-historical context, while oppositional, is all the same undeniable: the voice of the critic is very much an "isolated voice out of place but very much *of* that place" (613). The critic is an "isolated individual consciousness" (613) located at what he characterises as a "sensitive nodal point" (613) in that s/he is very much a product of his or her environment (Said uses the word "filiation" [614] to denote this relationship) at the same time that s/he is or feels ambivalent thereto (he writes of "*affiliation* with it through critical consciousness and scholarly work" [614]).

Said is of the view that the "whole imposing edifice of humanistic knowledge resting on the classics of European letters . . . represents only a fraction of the real human relationships and interactions now taking place in the world" (616). "New cultures, new societies, and emerging visions of social, political, and aesthetic order now lay claim to the humanist's attention" (617). Said's point is that we should no longer study the classics simply or the canon on the assumption that they are timeless and universal in their value but, rather, for the ways in which they sought to impose certain interpretations on the world that were not in and of themselves valuable or correct. (Said's interests in this regard range from Swift to Conrad.) He is especially interested in how the works of writers such as these subtended, most importantly, the 'self-fortification' of the European, that is, his sense of his own identity which was/is derived from the devaluation of a wide range of Others.

For Said, firstly, critics should not bind themselves to one particular methodology--the adoption of a particular theoretical perspective should be self-conscious but provisional. Secondly, the goal should be the establishment of the author's filiation to his/her natal culture and affiliation to some sort of intellectual system (these are sometimes at odds within the same author) in an effort to perceive the cultural practice or product in question as a "composite social and historical enterprise, made and remade unceasingly by men and women in society" (618). Thirdly, one should not ignore the non-literary in favour of the literary text: the "secular critical consciousness" (618) examines "those forms of writing affiliated with literature as a result of the ideological capture of literary text within the humanistic curriculum as it now stands" (618). Fourthly, criticism is "always situated" and, as such, never "value-free" (619): the inevitable trajectory of critical consciousness is to arrive at some acute sense of what political, social, and human values are entailed in the reading, production of every text" (619). The critic inevitably stands "*close to* . . . a concrete reality about which political, moral, and social judgments have to be made and, if not only made, then exposed and demystified" (619). Said agrees with Fish that every act of interpretation is "given force by an interpretive community" (619) but we must seek to understand "what historical and social configuration, what political interests are concretely entailed by the very existence of interpretive communities" (619).