

From the Editor

Edward Said is dead.

The narrow empirical truth of this statement only complicates any broader significances it might have. Nine years after his death, Said's ghost still appears to supervise important parts of the language and ethos of Middle East studies, at least insofar as "Orientalism" is used as a term of dismissal and abuse when discussing how differences are to be described and what they might mean. Orientalism is to Middle East studies what racism is to anthropology: an uncomfortable part of the field's past that it has been running fast to escape for much of the last half century. We try to suppress its manifestations in the broader culture to which we introduced the idea in the first place. And like racism, we reintroduce students to the ideas of Orientalism and to the reactions against it as a way of connecting them to our own concerns, our own stories, and to an idealized version of the imperfect past against which older generations bravely struggled and triumphed, so that younger generations can know the dignity of their forbears, the battles they fought, the truths they won, and the enemies we all still face. (Much to my surprise, Said's name has been invoked spontaneously in every issue of this journal for the past five years. And here he is again. In order to counter Orientalism's power we help perpetuate its mythology).

Said's own Orientalism was tactical and perhaps transitory. In *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (Columbia University Press, 1975), his immense meditation on the nature of creativity in literature and literary studies, Said used what we would now identify as a common Orientalist framework in order to contrast the nature of "western" literature to that of other bodies of literature. The Arab literary tradition stands as a marker of otherness, an example of how a world might be different from what we know:

Modern Arabic literature includes novels, but they are almost entirely of this century. There is no tradition out of which these modern works developed; basically at some point writers in Arabic became aware of European novels and began to write works like them. Obviously

it is not that simple; nevertheless, it is significant that the desire to create an alternative world, to modify or augment the real world through the act of writing (which is one motive underlying the novelistic tradition in the West) is inimical to the Islamic worldview. The Prophet is he who has *completed* a world-view; thus the word heresy in Arabic is synonymous with the verb “to innovate” or “to begin.” Islam views the world as a plenum, capable of neither diminishment nor amplification. Consequently, stories like those in *The Arabian Nights* are ornamental, variations on the world, not completions of it; neither are they lessons, structures, extensions, or totalities designed to illustrate either the author’s prowess in representation, the education of a character, or ways in which the world can be viewed and changed.

Thus even autobiography as a genre scarcely exists in Arabic literature. When it is to be found, the result is wholly special.... For almost every childhood occurrence narrated by [Taha Hussein in his autobiography *al-Ayyam*] is in some way connected with the Koran—not as a body of doctrine, but as a presence or fact of everyday life.... The book’s narrative style bears no resemblance to Koranic Arabic, so there is no question of imitation and hence of addition as in the Christian tradition. Rather one’s impression is that life is mediated by the Koran, informed by it; a gesture or an episode or a feeling in the boy’s life is inevitably reduced (always in an interesting way) back to a relationship to the Koran. In other words, no action can depart from the Koran; rather each action confirms the already completed presence of the Koran and, consequently, human existence (pp. 81-82).

Literary scholars might argue about the accuracy of the claims Said makes about literature. But regardless of their conclusions, we would certainly disagree, still, about what it might mean to distinguish “the” Christian tradition from “the” Islamic worldview, as Said does here. In *Beginnings* he is not attempting to understand or even to explore the Islamic worldview as such, but to characterize it as Other in such a way that it can anchor his discussion of the unique features of “Judeo-Christian textual traditions” (pp. 199, 200) whose identity and continuity he is working to establish and illuminate. Anyone who can show the difference between these passages and similar ones from prominent Orientalists Franz Rosenthal (whom Said cites with approval) or even the unjustly scorned Bernard Lewis, is welcome to try.

Perhaps this desire to nurture a tradition—literary or otherwise—for the purposes of having something to study is to be expected of someone who identified himself as a fundamentally conservative scholar (*Beginnings*, p. xiii). On the other hand, the complexities of Said’s thought usually defied easy categorization. “I have an equal amount of intolerance,” he explained,

for manifestos of delight in the culture, history, and tradition of a given society, and, on the other hand, for vehement attacks on culture, history, and tradition as instruments of outright repression. Both these moods—and they are scarcely more than that—are irresponsible; worse, they are uninteresting. Occasionally they are useful as reminders—of the fact that the tradition somehow continues to exist, and that it can sometimes also be repressive. More often, however, it is better not to treat such attitudes simply as objects of praise or blame at all—in order...*to hear what they say* (p. 19, italics in original).

This critical attitude of standing apart from but not necessarily against the traditions in which we are enmeshed, might be a better stance for Middle East studies and a better use of Said’s legacy, than the maintenance of the term Orientalism as a synonym for factual or interpretive error, of evil intent, or of false consciousness. Particularly since the beginning of the bloody twenty-first century, much has been written about the revival of Orientalist tropes in the Euroamerican public sphere. We might either laugh or cringe, for example, at the fact that reputable surveys claim that nearly twenty percent of Americans—and more than one third of conservative Republicans—believe President Barack Obama is a Muslim (http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Issues/Politics_and_Elections/growingnumber-full-report.pdf), a figure which has increased over the course of his presidency. Clearly one reaction to questions about the president’s religious identity might be that we need far better public education in this country to enlighten the ignorant and to give them the intellectual tools to resist the well-funded political propagandists who spread what they take to be a libel against their opponent’s character, morality, and cultural loyalties, a libel that emerges nicely from stereotypes about dark and dangerous others. One might also propose that broadening the reach of solid scholarship about the Middle East and Islam well beyond the university level might be necessary to give Americans an accurate idea of what Islam means and who Muslims are. Such proposals command nearly universal assent among the readers of this journal.

But I can’t help feeling that these approaches, as good as they make us feel about ourselves and the importance of our field, may ultimately be a

lost cause. People have reasons for their beliefs that are quite independent of what they are presented with in media or school curricula (that is, what one category of cultural elites and experts wants them to believe). “Scholarly activism,” whether in the form of public outreach or in the form of focused political activity, may be a contradiction in terms even when practiced with care and intelligence as an ethical necessity.

Aside from being condescending, such approaches to enlightenment foreclose what might be an altogether more interesting enterprise. Instead of thinking, for example, about how to convincingly demonstrate that Barack Obama is *not* a Muslim, we might find out more about American ways of thinking by asking about *just what kind of Muslim Barack Obama is*. American anthropologist William Irons of Northwestern University used to tell students about his discomfort that the Yomut Turkmen of Iran, among whom he worked in the 1960s and 1970s at the height of the Cold War, referred to him as a Russian. It took him some time, he said, to understand that they were not at all confused about his national identity; rather, for the Yomut, all white foreigners are Russians, and Irons’ rejection of the label was quite irrelevant.

What are Muslims, then, for the majority of Americans who may never have met one? How can we think in different ways about the relationship between descent, belief, tradition, practice, worldview, scriptural rhetoric, political institutions, ethnicity, and race? How can we trace the connections between local understandings of Muslimness—the question is just as relevant in the Middle East as it is in the United States—and the vastness of global and local media environments, the micropolitics of Protestant church organization, the conflicted history of racial intermarriage, the complexities of international migration, and so on? Why do Muslims and non-Muslim scholars define Muslimness in particular ways, and how do these intersect with and diverge from the understandings of a substantial minority of Americans? In other words, how might we avoid “treat[ing] such attitudes simply as objects of praise or blame”? How might we avoid seeing people’s divergent understandings simply as *misunderstandings*, and avoid throwing around a cheapened concept of Orientalism so that we can, with Said, *listen to what they say*?

The idea of Orientalism can be cheapened in many ways. It is diluted when it is presumed to be a general feature of the “western” academy or of particular traditions of close textual reading (to which Said himself was no stranger). It is damaged when it is fetishized as something separate from racism; when it doesn’t allow us to see, for example, how frequently and easily either a principled or a fashionable anti-Zionism can express

itself as casual, reactionary anti-Semitism, a kind of racism that concerned anti-Orientalists too often seem to ignore. It is degraded when we use it to denigrate critics of gender or class or cultural oppression in Middle Eastern societies, and when we pretend that Middle Easterners, as subalterns themselves, are innocent or exempt from their own racisms.

What do we need to do in order to keep Said's legacy of critical scholarship from being overshadowed by the tired and facile use of the term most often associated with his name?

Edward Said is dead. What comes next? ✂

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