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OPINION

A Critical Conscience: Remembering Edward Said

By [W.J.T. MITCHELL](#)

Any guise of critical neutrality or objectivity drops away when it comes to the death (and life) of Edward Said. Edward was one of the greatest scholar-critics of his generation, opening up entire new fields of thought and research for thousands of people in and out of the academic world. But he was also my dear, cherished friend for 22 years, and was to me both an inimitable exemplar of the highest calling of the intellectual life, and something like a teasing, needling older brother -- smarter, better looking, better dressed, more sophisticated, always out ahead somewhere on horizons that for me were just coming into view. He opened innumerable doors and windows for me, and seemed to regard me as something of a reclamation project -- a rude American cowboy badly in need of guidance and re-education, especially in matters of clothing. Our usual ritual upon meeting after some time apart was for him to look me up and down and pass withering judgments on the condition of my shoes, and to berate my obstinate reluctance to engage a proper tailor.

I have no idea how many hours we spent talking on the phone or face to face over meals during the last 20 years. He was a profound influence on *Critical Inquiry*, the scholarly journal I have edited for the last 25 years, a frequent contributor, and a crucial member of our advisory board. Since our first meeting at the 1981 *Critical Inquiry* conference on "The Politics of Interpretation," where he delivered his memorable paper on "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," our conversation was rarely interrupted for more than a month or two. We shared secrets and passions, surprises and standing jokes, gossip and grievances, and marathon tennis matches on Columbia University's clay courts.

We argued constantly -- over literary theory, new critical movements, postmodernism, deconstruction, politics, editorial decisions, and questions of taste. His characteristic strategy was to reduce me to silence, and then to turn the debate around and express some doubt about what he had been arguing, and to urge me to put up a better fight, like a boxer carrying his opponent for an extra round or two. This was, I feel, part of his larger critical strategy of cutting against the grain, questioning received ideas (including his own), and treating the critical encounter, not as a matter of "system" or "position," but of dialogic transformation. We shared William Blake's proverb "Opposition Is True Friendship."

Others can write with greater authority on Said's intellectual achievements as a scholar of music, literature, and the arts, and as a spokesman for the Palestinians. No one, I think, can quite grasp the totality of his ambitions -- his voracious reading in history and politics, in the literatures of Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East. For me, the characteristic gesture of both his cultural and political writing (which, despite his claim to lead "two lives," always seemed to me all of a piece) was the *turn* from the straight, predictable path, the reversal of field, the interrupted itinerary. So that, having by many accounts founded the entire field of what is called "postcolonial" studies, he immediately set about to critique it, to question its emergent complacencies and received ideas. His role as spokesman for Palestine involved similar turns and complexities. He often said that he wanted to help bring a Palestinian state into existence so that then he could play his proper role as critic, and attack it.

His most profound reflection on the Palestinian people is, in my view, *After the Last Sky* (Pantheon, 1999), a book-length essay written in collaboration with the great Swiss photographer Jean Mohr. This book took a double risk, engaging with a visual art form (a medium that Said often confessed put him into a "panic"), and with the interior, private lives of an oppressed people whose lives are and were in many ways quite alien to the cosmopolitan and rather aristocratic life that Edward enjoyed.

The result is a marvelous, many-layered reflection on images of the Palestinians, the stereotypes circulated about them, but also *by* them; their fantasies and fixations, virtues and vices. The book is, of course, an impassioned plea for international recognition of the justice of Palestinian claims, and a polemic against the hideous occupation and dispossession they have suffered for half a century. But much more importantly, it is a mirror *for* the Palestinians, a critical reflection on their political mistakes, their cultural shortcomings.

Above all, it is a confession of Said's own ambiguous relation to his people, which is nothing like that of a "spokesman" in the usual sense -- i.e., a mouthpiece for power. Edward was a spokesman in the way the Jewish prophets spoke for and to Israel: a chiding, challenging voice, sometimes in the wilderness, sometimes in the opera house or symphony hall, sometimes at the movies or in the preface to a book of poems or a graphic documentary, and sometimes in the academic lecture theater, always speaking the unwelcome truth to power.

For me, the voice of these public occasions was inseparable from the avuncular, teasing figure so often found bantering with friends and relatives -- black and white, Jew and Arab, Irish and English and Indian -- at the dinner table of the eminent Palestinian historian Rashid Khalidi and his wife, Mona. His voice on the telephone, no matter how racked with illness in the last couple of years, could, without a hitch, transform itself into the voice heard so often on PBS or the BBC -- an eloquent, insistent intelligence grounded in depths of learning and feeling, and leavened by a wicked sense of humor and passionate indignation. Walking and talking with Edward were one and the same thing: a headlong, breathless, long-legged conversation, heedless of curbs, interrupted without warning by full stops. I would suddenly find myself walking alone, turning back toward his look of astonishment, or grabbed by the arm and pulled up short: "But, dear boy, you cannot be serious!" Or "No! *Really?* Just as I always suspected!" Neither the low places of academic politics nor the high places of global strategizing were spared the lash of his wit and the exercise of his intelligence. No ally, no matter how close, was above criticism; no opponent exempt from the verbal cruelty of which he was a master.

Said was, it should be remembered, a polemicist, a literary warrior in the tradition of Jonathan Swift. His wicked humor and teasing in private life became unbridled satire on the public page. He was often angry at *Critical Inquiry* (and at me) for publishing articles that were critical of him, and he once denounced a hapless opponent in our "Critical Response" section as a fictitious person, a fraudulent assemblage of ideological clichés. He was an angry young man, an angry middle-aged man, and he was learning how to play the brilliant curmudgeon, endlessly chastising his would-be followers and younger colleagues for being slaves of fashion, and for writing barbarous, jargon-ridden prose. And of course he inspired anger, hatred, resentment, envy in others. He was constantly being accused of lacking "balance" in his political writings, failing to condemn Palestinian terrorism as frequently and vehemently as he attacked Israel's state terrorism -- as if any polemicist worthy of the name has ever been known for *balance*, as if there were some moral calculus that requires every condemnation of the violence of the strong to be "balanced" by an equal-time condemnation of the resistance of the weak.

Edward's public appearances were plagued by death threats that he dismissed (along with his cancer) as an annoying distraction, and (even worse) by questioners who wanted to lure him into anti-Semitic comments, or to characterize his criticisms of Israel as expressions of anti-Semitism. (That canard has now been institutionalized by a nationwide campaign to hurl accusations of racism at intellectuals who

question Israeli policies in any way; in this sense, we have all become Edward Saids.)

Edward never wavered in his resistance to the seductions of hate speech and hateful thinking in public or private. In his conversation one could sense the presence of numerous Jewish interlocutors, of the intimate connectedness of Palestinian and Jewish cultures and histories, of the feeling for peoples linked by a common tragic destiny, as if the Palestinians could be thought of as the Jews of the Jews. Although he did not speak Hebrew, he liked to quote the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, who has said he makes love in Hebrew, a language he had learned as a child.

We spent a week together in the West Bank and Israel in the fall of 1998 on the occasion of a remarkable international conference at Birzeit University. The conference, "Landscape Perspectives on Palestine," was the most profoundly affecting academic gathering I have ever attended. (The proceedings were later published as *The Landscape of Palestine: Equivocal Poetry*, by Birzeit University Publications, in 1999.) With participants from every corner of the globe, every discipline of the humanities and social sciences, mixing Israeli and Palestinian intellectuals, it now seems like a distant, utopian moment of hope for peace in the Middle East. A new generation seemed poised to take over from the old warriors, Arafat and Sharon, ready to move into a time (which now seems unimaginable) of reconciliation and mutual discovery.

Edward, the late Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, and I traveled by car with relative ease from Ramallah to Jerusalem to Jaffa, visiting childhood places, looking for "disappeared" Palestinian villages and neighborhoods, getting lost in the Orthodox Jewish section of Jerusalem, and swimming in the Mediterranean. Edward, always a powerful swimmer, quickly left us behind in the shallows and swam far out into the sea until his head was just a dot, appearing and disappearing in the swells. He has swum out too far for us to follow now. But the ebb and flow of his conversation continues and will continue in the criticism, the politics, the culture, and the evolution of human thought to come.

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