

# A Tribute

## Edward Said 1935-2003

Alan Lipman

Like a myriad of others, I plucked the saddening, though long expected, news off the internet. Edward Said had died. His courageous struggle against leukaemia for more than a decade was ended. Marc Antony's dimly recalled response on finding the self-immolated body of his enemy Brutus on the battlefield at Philippi, rushed unbidden to mind, 'This was a man take him for all in all. I shall not look upon his like again'. Who but a deeply grieving naïf would openly admit to what has become a cliché for such occasions?

As I write, in one marginally less dishevelled corner among the many, many loved authors who have helped to shape my consciousness, there is a section containing Said's volumes. When I am baffled by my shallow knowledge of classical music, I turn at once to his extraordinarily lucid *Musical Elaborations*, which, while reading and learning, reminds me of his reportedly fine piano playing, his devotion, for instance, to Beethoven. And, when I am despairingly unnerved by the embedded enmities of the imperially named Middle East, I refer to such seminal works as *Peace and Its Discontents*, or I enmesh myself again in *Covering Islam: how the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*.

When, all too often, the very act of writing becomes problematic, I search once more for renewed energy in his empathetic *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Then, when the interacting worlds of literature, social power, politics and deliberately fostered prejudice become wholly dispiriting, seemingly incapable of humane resolution, I dip again and again into the penetrating, the scholarly insights that mark his magisterial, perhaps most influential book, *Orientalism*. There, in that sharp intelligence, one finds hope for – no, assurance of – studied, studiously rational discourse.

There, in that patently original, hugely learned, readily accessible book,

I am moved yet again to reappraise the arrogant, the ever-ignorant texts that depict colonial 'Others' as ineffable inferiors, as unworthy, untrustworthy ... and much else that is humiliating in its taken-for-granted disparagements. There I find repeated, telling evidence of Said's resolve to view and portray people as active agents, autonomous beings; not as passive victims of their circumstances. In this, one sees a determined turning from the presently modish affirmations of Georg W F Hegel's apparently enduring, unrelenting dichotomy – Master and Slave.

Said was born in western Jerusalem, British-mandated Palestine. Later, his well-to-do Christian family moved to Egypt where he was expensively schooled. Yet later, he moved to the United States where he married, settled and became Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, New York. From that base he wrote and was published on an array of topics: from literary and cultural studies to music, public/civil dilemmas and, far from least, the Palestinian issues that preoccupied him for much of his adult life. He was a polymath – observant, analytic, honest and sensitively alerted to the poignant circumstances of his fellow human beings; in particular, of course, his Palestinian compatriots. I have little doubt that those affected by this wide range will mourn his death; will be lessened by his passing.

He was unaffected by precious, overly fastidious fears of 'contaminating' literature with socio-political matters. Indeed, in his analyses of admired authors – from Jane Austen to Joseph Conrad, for instance – and in interrogating his own work, Said sought always to challenge what he described as 'polite', insipid literary criticism. As his mentor Raymond Williams, a searchingly trenchant analyst, commented, 'It is a pleasure to read someone who not only has studied and thought so carefully but is also beginning to substantiate, as distinct from announcing, a genuinely emergent way of thinking'.

Once read and digested, the ways of thinking explored and practised in books such as *Orientalism* or *Cultural Imperialism* cannot be expunged: critically appraised, yes; but summarily dismissed, casually abandoned, no. Like his advocacy vis-à-vis the works he studied, Said's own writings are not readily amenable to offhand judgements – they call insistently for the diligent care that Williams ascribes to them.

Said was, as his friends and colleagues affirm, often deeply hurt by the frequently vicious, implacable attacks of his political opponents – many of whom depicted him as a dreaded other; as a singularly embittered, deeply

bigoted enemy. Nonetheless, he confronted these painful affronts with stoicism. That especially characterised his customary responses to the putatively anti-West and anti-semitic 'prejudices' that were loosely, wildly, ignorantly attributed to him. It also extended to his personal, his physical courage; a quality that was severely tested by his debilitating final illness.

I well remember the fortitude with which he publicly, boldly defended Salman Rushdie for the purportedly infamous slanders the latter was said to have perpetrated in his novel *Satanic Verses*. Standing on the steps leading into the central building of Columbia University, Said read the offending – the supposedly 'offensive' – passages to a crowded audience, thus defying the disgraceful, the overtly murderous, *fatwa* issued against Rushdie, as well as on any accused of supporting him.

Edward Said was no yea-sayer, no cosily ensconced academic who communicated principally, ever so cautiously, with other scholarly, similarly cosseted, aloof elites. Quite the contrary. As he painstakingly unravelled in a brilliant essay on the responsibilities of intellectuals, Said was fiercely committed to open participation in, and repeated exposure to, public arenas of debate. The price exacted for the privileged lives of university personnel, teachers and research workers, was, he held, active involvement in public affairs, including, where necessary, political activism.

Jonathan Swift, the outspoken 18<sup>th</sup> century intellectual, was – Said's critical assessments aside – an inspirational model. That, I imagine, is why he, Said, sits so proudly on my and many others' bookshelves: he has been, and will remain, a yardstick by which to measure principled action in a grossly disturbed, disturbing world.