“Contented Homeland Peace”

The Motif of Exile in Edward Said

Robert Spencer

_He had no leisure to regret what he had lost, he was so wholly and naturally concerned for what he had failed to obtain_

—JOSEPH CONRAD, LORD JIM, 104

Theodor W. Adorno once described Gustav Mahler’s Fourth Symphony as searching for “contented homeland peace, healed of the pain of frontiers” (Adorno 1992: 44). The phrase is also a felicitous description of the political ideal, tentatively suggested and then articulated with increasing frankness in later writings, of Edward W. Said, the world-renowned critic (until his much-lamented death in 2003) of imperial arrogance, cultural misapprehension, and Israel’s unremitting maltreatment of the Palestinians. As Said recognized in his _Musical Elaborations_, where he declared himself “profoundly indebted in all sorts of ways” to Adorno’s work (Said 1991: 15), the pair had rather more in common than a seldom pronounced initial. I hope to show here that the aspiration that Adorno raised in a vague and even utopian fashion takes more definite shape in Said’s work as a feasible political project. Notwithstanding Said’s well-documented advocacy of exile as a technique of intellectual discovery and dissent, he demonstrably shared Adorno’s vision of homecoming (that is, of a boundless and egalitarian polity) and rejected the practice of exile as an attractive _mode de vie_ in its own right. “Marginality and homelessness,” he declared, “are not, in my opinion, to be gloried in; they are to be brought to an end, so that more, and not fewer, people can enjoy the benefits of what has for centuries been denied the victims of race, class, or gender” (Said 2000a: 385). Exile, in other words, is a means not an end; it is above all a way of thinking. Exile involves a willingness to step outside the province of ideological preconceptions, sectarian loyalties, and insentient theoretical and philosophical systems. Moreover, it enables us to alert those inward-looking dogmas to the reality they obscure and to the experiences
and lives, which they routinely overlook, of the persecuted, the marginalized, and the dispossessed. Exile allows us to contrast insular doctrines with the real political alternatives disclosed by open discussion, sensitive scholarship, unprejudiced cultural contact, and, above all, by a tolerant regard for the equality and diversity of human life. It involves not a cynical or complacent disengagement from the world, therefore, but a radical dissatisfaction with the needless conflicts, parochialisms, and inequalities by which the world is riven.

For Said, who was less willing than Adorno to sugarcoat this radical vision with euphemisms, a borderless homeland meant nothing less than a democratic and cosmopolitan global polity free of racial and national strife and liberated also from humanly wasteful economic exploitation. Various interpreters, sympathetic and otherwise, have sought to airbrush this ideal from Said’s writings, and my purpose here is, via a close scrutiny of some of these, to place his cosmopolitan and even universalist vision at the forefront of our assessments of his impressive, not to say hugely relevant body of work. In the academic field of postcolonial studies, for instance, which Said’s Orientalism effectively founded, some theorists have confused the critical mind-set instilled by exile with a sort of extreme intellectual skepticism that sees the pursuit of knowledge as complicit in the pursuit of power and that dismisses universal values as a cover for imperial rule. Critics like Dennis Porter (1993) and James Clifford (1988: 255–76) claim to have found an inconsistency in Orientalism between its humanist faith in the possibility of knowledge and the existence of common values and its methodological reliance on the antihumanist theory of Michel Foucault. From a more leftist standpoint, albeit an intemperate and not very fair-minded one, Aijaz Ahmad has portrayed Said as a sort of metropolitan dilettante, more interested in hovering aloofly above the fray, declining affiliations, and carping about attempts to know about or evince solidarity toward different cultures, societies, and peoples (1992: 159–219). From a quite different perspective, that of justifying the invasion and occupation of Iraq, Christopher Hitchens (2003) has argued similarly that his erstwhile collaborator slighted the possibilities of intellectual work and, specifically, denied the possibility of nonviolent communication between cultures. Faced by such mischaracterizations, we need urgently to remind ourselves that the goal of Said’s thought was convergence rather than conflict, fraternity rather than frontiers, democracy rather than discord—in short, a just and reconciled international homeland rather than divisive separatism or the lawless hegemony of powerful states.

I contend that we should characterize Said’s project as a dialogic one, speaking philosophically, a dialectical one. Said’s work is dialectical in two senses: in its desire to sketch connections that are usually obscured by parochial points of view and in its consequent urge for reconciliation. Indeed, exile serves Said as something of a synonym for dialectical method. He argues that the responsible intelligence has a duty to set sail from the familiar views and idées reçues of the native realm (Said
2000a: 173–86; Said 1994b: 35–47). The exile must view the conjectures and premises of his outlook with the skeptical gaze and critical distance of the outsider, testing its tenets against the reservations of interlocutors and the possible rejoinders of a previously unconsidered and unheeded reality. He is like the shipwrecked protagonist of Joseph Conrad's story "Amy Foster," washed up on unfamiliar shores and abruptly “taken out of his knowledge” (Conrad 1992: 195). All of Said's work, from Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography (1966), his first published book, to his final texts on the war in Iraq and the idea of lateness, was distinguished by its awareness that personality, identity, and outlook are not set in stone but are improvable by exposure to novel experiences, strange encounters, and stimulating deliberations. Said's early remarks on Conrad hold true both as an encapsulation of his approach and as a manifesto for intellectual conduct.

Conrad's individuality resides in a continuous exposure of his sense of himself to a sense of what is not himself: he set himself, lumpish and problematic, against the dynamic, fluid processes of life. Because of this, then, the great human appeal and distinction of Conrad's life is the dramatic spirit of partnership, however uneasy or indecorous, his life exemplifies, a partnership between himself and the external world. I am speaking of the full exposition of his soul to the vast panorama of existence it has discerned outside itself. He had the courage to risk a full confrontation with what, most of the time, seemed to him to be a threatening and unpleasant world. Moreover, the outcome of this dialectic is an experiencing of existential reality at that deepest level of alternative and potentiality which is the true life of the mind (Said 1966: 9).

I wish to draw attention to that last phrase, in particular to its association of alternative and potentiality with the true life of the mind. By summarizing two crucial intellectual aptitudes to which the practice of exile gives rise, it captures a great deal of what is important and salutary in Said's work. The first is the Conradian willingness to face up to a world that is sometimes alien and minatory and by so doing to employ the process of dialogue (of exposure to unfamiliar experiences and points of view) to test and then refute parochial ideas and loyalties. “To be in a conversation,” as Hans-Georg Gadamer, the philosopher of hermeneutics, remarks, “means to be beyond oneself, to think with the other and to come back to oneself as if to another” (Gadamer 1989: 110). Hence dialogue is synonymous with the mind-broadening power of travel, of an itinerant exploration of alternative perspectives. Inseparable from the first consequence of an exilic sensibility is the second: the capacity to envision a cosmopolitan polity. If exile entails the practice of dialogue, then the substantive ideal it entails is obviously not a carefree withdrawal from political responsibilities. Instead, exile allows one to envision an inclusive homeland in which all contribute equally to the common process of deliberation and all take shelter under the legally enforceable human rights that make such participation possible. Said's proposal for a nonsectarian settlement in his native Pales-
tine is a model for such a community, underpinned by cosmopolitan solidarity and liberated from clannish realties. Exile, then, is undertaken not for its own sake but for the sake of a cosmopolitan mentality that, in encompassing numerous experiences and points of view, begins to discern a common humanity beneath the divisive ideologies of separateness and tribal division. Exile betokens an itinerant impatience with the shelter of entrenched doctrines; it subjects insular mentalities to the myriad rejoinders of other outlooks, mind-sets, and experiences, and in so doing it strengthens the bonds of sympathy and solidarity necessary to inaugurate a just, equitable, and, to borrow Adorno’s terms, contented, peaceful, and borderless homeland. A democratic global community is required to codify this cosmopolitan disposition and surmount the divisions and inequalities that capitalism and imperialism have not ceased to inflict on the ideal of human community.

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Said’s universalism is thus found less in a utopian blueprint imposed on reality than in a way of thinking and criticizing that, by its intrinsic momentum, generates a cosmopolitan political vision. He has bequeathed less a finished system or inflexible method than an uncomplicated but profoundly enabling disposition, an exemplary commitment to the restless activity of thought that refuses to limit its range by flattering power, condoning orthodoxy, or contenting itself with parochial allegiances. His epitaph could be the final lines of the young Wordsworth’s sonnet “To Toussaint l’Ouverture” which assure that fallen champion of anticolonial resistance that “thou hast great allies;/ Thy friends are exultations, agonies,/ And love, and man’s unconquerable mind” (1971: 243).

That mind, as Jim Merod has written, “rejects and, ultimately, refutes the seductive persuasions of certainties that impede its own meandering path” (2000: 116). This belief in the empowering capacity of unobstructed thought illuminates all of Said’s work: his philosophical disquisition on the nature of origins, his dissection of the pseudo-expertise about the non-Western world peddled in the news media, his disapproval of inward-looking theoretical standpoints, his perspicacious literary criticism and, of course, his advocacy of the Palestinian cause. The motif of exile, which is omnipresent in Said’s writings, cannot be separated from what I have identified as his thought’s intrepid bent because one's physical and especially intellectual distance is what allows one to write critically and constructively about culture and ideology and about the kinds of knowledge produced in the academy. “Exile is a model for the intellectual who is tempted, and even beset and overwhelmed, by the rewards of accommodation, yea-saying, settling in. Even if one is not an actual immigrant or expatriate, it is still possible to think as one, to imagine and investigate in spite of barriers, and always to move away from the centralizing authorities towards the margins, where you see things that are usually lost on minds
that have never traveled beyond the conventional and the comfortable” (Said 1994b: 46–7).

The important point for my purposes here is that Said advocated exile as a means not an end. He never followed the example of Gilles Deleuze’s “nomad thought”—in which truth, physical being, and one’s convictions are in a state of constant flux (Deleuze 1977)—by detaching himself from political and intellectual commitments and euphically hymning travel as an end in itself. Moreover, nothing could be further from Said’s work than Homi Bhabha’s insouciant endorsement of the conditions of dispersal and homelessness. He recognized that such circumstances are far more congenial for the peripatetic academic than they could ever be for the beleaguered seeker of asylum or, as Said would need no reminding, for an entire people expelled, subjugated, and punished unendingly for the sheer fact of their endurance and their still-unquenched yearning for return. We need, in other words, to distinguish Said’s account of exile as a predominantly intellectual phenomenon and a source of dissidence from the kind of glib rhetoric that Michael Mann has described as “breathless transnationalism” (Mann 2001: 117), Tom Nairn has called (more unforgivingly) “departure lounge internationalism” (Nairn 2000: 148), and Andrew Smith has termed (more unforgivingly still) “the “free-air-miles” sentiment in postcolonial theory” (Smith 2004: 245). Exile is not the same thing as intellectual license; it does not imply a sort of weightless disregard for worldly commitments. The exile, as Bruce Robbins notes, is too conscious of the manifest toll exacted by displacement and dispossession to imagine that exile is its own reward (1983: 69). For the displaced, the loss of tradition, continuity, and locality saps their individual and collective strength. In a moving and ruminate commentary accompanying Jean Mohr’s photographs of Palestinian lives, Said bore witness to the privation that results from losing easy contact with the conversation of sympathetic interlocutors and with the familiar reference points of a known and cherished world.

The stability of geography and the continuity of land—these have completely disappeared from my life and the life of all Palestinians. If we are not stopped at borders, or herded into new camps, or denied reentry and residence, or barred from travel from one place to another, more of our land is taken, our lives are interfered with arbitrarily, our voices are prevented from reaching each other, our identity is confined to frightened little islands in an inhospitable environment of superior military force sanitized by the clinical jargon of pure administration. . . . Continuity for them, the dominant population; discontinuity for us, the dispossessed and dispersed. (Said 1993: 19–20)

Said’s work does not confuse the agreeable wayfaring of the strong with the unenviable expatriation of the weak, or the uncommitted intellectual’s frivolous wanderlust with the fate of those driven from their native soil by occupiers’ rifle butts. Said considered exile a predominantly intellectual phenomenon, or else a disagreeable condition that can nonetheless, in extremis, be turned resourcefully to account.
In *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975), his dense philosophical meditation on originality, Said identified the sort of outlook that exile serves to correct. He dissects a dogma of originality that authorizes ideas and theories by situating them in a line of supposedly unbroken dynastic descent from some unchallengeable and usually divine genesis. Origins require slavish compliance by those required to perpetuate their rulings. A beginning, however, is a secular departure from (not an obedient ratification of, or, for that matter, a catastrophic break with) existing ideas and practices. Beginnings require an innovative and even subversive willingness to deviate from customary ways of thinking and acting. Origins are doctrinaire by definition: they pass themselves off as conclusive and unarguable dictates, otherworldly revelations that brook no opposition or divergence. Beginnings, in contrast, intervene creatively in meanings and institutions. “To make explicit what is usually allowed to remain implicit; to state that which, because of professional consensus, is ordinarily not stated or questioned; to begin again rather than to take up writing dutifully at a designated point and in a way ordained by tradition; above all, to write in and as an act of discovery rather than out of respectful obedience to established ‘truth’—these add up to the production of knowledge, they summarize the method of beginning about which this book turns” (Said 1997a: 379).

Said expounds this method by way of an ingenious interpretation of the work of Giambattista Vico, the eighteenth-century Neapolitan philosopher of history. For Vico, the mind fashions its own world, albeit with occasionally unintended and unruly consequences: “That which did all this was mind,” he asserts audaciously as he surveys human history, “for men did it with intelligence; it was not fate, for they did it by choice” (1968: 425). The world about us springs not from the incontestable edicts of scripture but from the contingent endeavors of human intellect and labor. It is not fixed or frozen, held in place by a Mosaic law of precepts and prohibitions but alive with opportunities for alteration and improvement. Its interpreters, therefore, ought to reject grand theories that endeavor in vain to encapsulate this turbulent domain with their verdicts and forecasts; they should instead fix their attention on a secular world that cannot possibly be described or evaluated except by the most meticulous sensitivity to history in all its diversity and changeableness.

Said worried that contemporary cultural theory had failed to heed these warnings. Indeed, he was convinced that theorizing takes place largely in a monastic and even provincial state of intellectual withdrawal (Hart 2000: 143–62). In “Secular Criticism,” “The World, the Text, and the Critic,” and “Traveling Theory” (Said 1983) and again in 1993’s *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argued that theoretical systems, from the purportedly comprehensive to the most modish and apparently self-critical, are preoccupied with their own precepts rather than with the infinitely more powerful actuality of real history. The goal of criticism should be to interrogate this inwardness and escape it. “A knowledge of history, a recognition of the importance of social circumstance, an analytical capacity for making distinctions: these trou-
ble the quasi-religious authority of being comfortably at home among one’s people, supported by known powers and acceptable values, protected against the outside world” (Said 1983: 15–16).

Though he often defended the ideal of the university in the most romantic terms, Said was convinced that the academy can give rise to an introverted guild mentality in its associates, particularly those camped under the banner of postmodernism. He denounced the adherents of high theory for a fixation with textuality so extreme that they desert their duty to appraise wider society and for their similarly drastic distrust of the ideals of emancipation and enlightenment. “Cults like post-modernism, discourse analysis, New Historicism, deconstruction, neo-pragmatism transport them into the country of the blue; an astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history and individual responsibility fritters away attention to public matters, and to public discourse. The result is a kind of floundering about that is most dispiriting to witness, even as the society as a whole drifts without direction or coherence” (Said 1994a: 366–67).

Attention to “public matters” rather than conformity to whatever system or method is presently in vogue in one’s culture or profession is an essential part of the critic’s “worldliness.” The worldly critic should not, therefore, express himself in jargon; because the production and promulgation of knowledge are his aims, he will neither befuddle nor talk down to his audience but instead address a broad constituency in an intelligible but not simplistic or patronizing idiom. Said’s punctilious approach to his work recalls Ernst Bloch’s celebration of the similarly sharp-eyed Walter Benjamin. “A sense for the peripheral: Benjamin had what Lukács so drastically lacked: a unique gaze for the significant detail, for what lies alongside, for those fresh elements which, in thinking and in the world, arise from here, for the individual things (Einzelsein) which intrude in an unaccustomed and nonschematic way, things which do not fit in with the usual lot and therefore deserve particular, incisive attention” (1988: 340).

Said’s often acclaimed eloquence was not so much a personal foible as an integral part of his thought. His precision of expression embodied his respect for illuminating details. Indeed, this unseasonable deference to the truth-telling capacity of language amounts to a rearguard defense of its referential role against those postmodernists for whom language is terminally inexact and whose prolix, convoluted idiom bears the scars of this rejection. Said’s thought is essayistic in the best sense: discursive, informal, alert to the requirements of particular problems, and mindful of thought’s obligation to its material. The essay, a form that Said celebrated in theory and employed peerlessly in practice, was thus uniquely fitted for the scrupulously precise character of his thought: “If I am to be taken seriously as saying that secular criticism deals with local and worldly situations, and that it is constitutively opposed to the production of massive, hermetic systems, then it must follow that the essay—a comparatively short, investigative, radically skeptical form—is the prin-
principal way in which to write criticism” (Said 1983: 26). This remark, with its characteristic disapproval of overbearing methods and its emphasis on specificity and intention, echoes Adorno’s contention that the essay, because it is at once penetrating and self-critical, is the appropriate form for unfolding reality.

In its relationship to scientific procedure and its philosophical grounding as method, the essay, in accordance with its idea, draws the fullest conclusions from the critique of system . . . In the realm of thought it is virtually the essay alone that has successfully raised doubts about the absolute privilege of method . . . The word Versuch, attempt or essay, in which thought’s utopian vision of hitting the bullseye is united with the consciousness of its own fallibility and provisional character, indicates, as do most historically surviving terminologies, something about the form, something to be taken all the more seriously in that it takes place not systematically but rather as a characteristic of an intention groping its way. (Adorno 1991: 9, 16)

The essay is as distrustful of generalizations as it is sensitive to particulars. It is experimental and suggestive, a type of diligent inquiry guided not by dogma or the wish to assemble a system but by the singular qualities of objects.

The lesson we should draw from Said’s advocacy of secularism and worldliness is that we ought to object to abstract systems of explanation like Orientalism not, as many of his successors in the field of postcolonial theory have assumed, because such theories are too concerned with the world outside their own narrow sphere but because they are not concerned enough with that world. The reason for Said’s critique of misleading scholarship about Islam and the Middle East has therefore usually been missed. The main contention of Orientalism is not, as that text’s own idiom leads us to suspect, identical with Michel Foucault’s claim that knowledge is inextricably bound up with the exercise of power. We should not be misled by that idiom into misrepresenting Said as a skeptic about the feasibility and even the desirability of instructive empirical knowledge. His critiques of scholarly misapprehension and of the sort of discourse about the world outside Europe and North America that holds sway in the news media take aim not so much at the complicity of knowledge in power as they do at the complicity of ignorance in power. For to simply map the world onto one’s preconceptions is, of course, to achieve the precise opposite of wisdom. Unconscionable generalizations made without knowledge of or sympathy with their object are as noisy and as destructive but also, crucially, as ineffective as the shells of the French warship in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, pointlessly pounding an unknown and indomitable continent (Conrad 1995: 30–31). Catchall tags like “the East” and “the Islamic world” or, that cliché beloved of savvy-seeming television news correspondents, the fickle and unanimous temper of the “Arab Street,” are less accurate designations or even harmless shorthand than ideological labels, conjectures that cloud our vision where it most needs to be enhanced. Wittingly or otherwise, they compress a dense and complex reality into an
assemblage of abstract stereotypes that have the effect of painting the non-Western world as inferior, dependent, requiring and even positively beseeching the intervention and tutelage of more advanced powers.

Said’s real contention in *Orientalism* is that to this day a great many of those who take it upon themselves to fathom “the East,” far from being disinterested onlookers, have on the contrary connived in the oppression of its peoples. Instead of dispassionately inquiring into the circumstantial reality of other societies and ways of life, fraudulent sages have broken faith with the intellectual vocation by intensifying the kind of ignorance that breeds misapprehension, as well as fear and abuse. Despite the professed comprehensiveness of the Orientalists’ categories, the so-called Orient has been not so much covered as covered up, its details and sheer variety shrouded in a thick fog of slogans and clichés. Indeed, a generalization, given the enormous variety and nuance in the object studied, cannot but be a misrepresentation. Thus scholars become complicit in the subjugation of the Orient not because of their attempt to know but because of their attempt to know it without sufficient consciousness of the dangers of parroting orthodox interpretations and of relying on the government and mainstream media for information. In doing so, they cannot have a sense of the inescapable precariousness and quixotic nature of such interpretations or the necessary discrimination and knowledge of historical context (Said 1985: 255–328).

Writers who resort to generalizations and received ideas to describe other societies succeed only in imprisoning their work behind a barricade of clichés and stereotypes. V.S. Naipaul, for instance, is no shrinking violet, but his travel writing has never set foot outside his preconceptions. Naipaul tours the globe, but his ideas, alas, do not accompany him; they stay home. In his *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey* (1982), Naipaul tours Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Iran without becoming any the wiser about Islam and its adherents, declaring as he goes abusive and uninformed epithets in place of considered, knowledgeable analysis. Despite his book’s portentous subtitle, it is the work of a timorous stay-at-home who never ventures far beyond the shelter of his prejudices. Naipaul sees only malcontents and ingrates, quarrelsome inhabitants of enraged but parasitic societies. “He does not learn,” as Said mordantly noted, “they prove” (Said 2000a: 113). Naipaul’s undeserved reputation for candor and “telling it like it is” actually masks a deep ignorance; he eschews well-versed inquiry in favor of fallacious and superficial reports that are both intellectually unavailing and morally unconcerned. One charge that cannot be leveled at such appraisals, therefore, is that they have been too concerned with investigating the world. Rather, they have generalized from a great distance and without adequate sympathy or insight. Pontificators like Naipaul, deficient in care, respect, and sensitivity, give rise not to knowledge but to partisan systems of distortion that are bereft of either wisdom or fellow feeling.

Said’s point in *Orientalism* (1985), *Covering Islam* (1997b), and *The Question of
Palestine (1992) is that we must bear in mind the close and even causal relationship between orthodox knowledge about the rest of the world and the destructive deeds perpetrated there by corporations and states. Disregarding the lives and views of vast numbers of men and women by issuing negligent clichés that dub them profitless and unimportant (or else ignore their existence altogether) is but one short step away from enacting belligerent policies that, on the authority of such assessments, actually assume such people to be nugatory details, expendable pawns in a grand strategic plan. In the careless use of language, citizens and policy makers forgo the intellectual and moral effort required for worthwhile thought. They are shielded from a complex and heterogeneous reality by a thick wall of imprecise language. The real human suffering behind that wall is either unseen and unheeded or else is legitimized by the use of abstract terms to plan and prescribe outcomes, destinies, and fates. Happily, however, such terms can be challenged by sensitive interpretations or, put differently, by a dialogic alertness to the actual features of one’s object of study. We should not hold forth from afar as if a complex reality can be explained away with a hunch or dissected in full with a set of largely unexamined and entirely inappropriate surmises. Said, then, was for rational inquiry and the pursuit of knowledge and against thought’s habit of walling itself in with abstractions: “If it is not to be merely a form of self-validation,” he wrote, “criticism must intend knowledge and, what is more, it must attempt to deal with, identify, and produce knowledge as having something to do with will and with reason” (Said 1983: 202).

To become conversant with another society, people, or culture, one’s interpretations must be based on detailed scrutiny of the evidence, not on conformity to an existing system of ideas. Said modeled this approach on the aptitudes required to elucidate literary texts, which are, he shows us, sensitively analyzed and ceaselessly reinterpreted rather than subjected to some doctrinaire final assessment (Said 2000a: 201). Important works of literature contest our preconceptions. They are, he reminded Daniel Barenboim, ‘all about a voyage to the ‘other,’ and not concentrating on oneself, which is very much a minority view today. There is more of a concentration today on the affirmation of identity, on the need for roots, on the value of one’s culture and one’s sense of belonging. It’s become quite rare to project one’s self outward, to have a broader perspective” (Said and Barenboim 2004: 11).

Literature and his typically acute interpretations of it were thus the fount of Said’s thought and the basis of his political vision. This approach confirms Paul Ricoeur’s remark that “one of the aims of all hermeneutics is to struggle against cultural distance” (Ricoeur 1995: 159). Commencing with Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography, the fruit of his doctoral studies at Harvard, Said’s work displayed a remarkably consistent conviction that both personality and outlook are the products of a series of dialogic exposures to novel situations and interlocutors. This neglected monograph offers an exploration of Conrad’s consciousness in the manner of the now largely forgotten Geneva School of literary criticism (whose first generation
included such interesting critics as Marcel Raymond, Georges Poulet, and Albert Béguin). This unmethodical approach focuses critical attention on the exemplary consciousness of the author as it is manifested in his creative work and other written matter. The critic looks upon the work as a record of the attempt to use the confessional art of writing to elucidate an endurable relationship between the self and its world. Criticism’s aim for these writers, as J. Hillis Miller has said, is to attain “consciousness of consciousness” (1966: 305). Modern subjectivity is characterized by the self-conscious mind’s intense reflection on its own capacities, driven by anxiety about the perils and risks of modern life. The aftermath of this acute self-absorption is the author’s desire (usually unavailing but no less impressive and even heroic for that) to negotiate a new modus operandi with the outside world whereby exile, solitude, and the fear of personal dissolution can all find a new and satisfying accommodation.

Said’s book on Conrad charts the novelist’s assiduous creation of a character with which to regulate the troublesome intercourse between self and world. He looks at Conrad’s voluminous correspondence as a sustained elaboration and presentation of a noteworthy character and views his novels as oblique fictional enactments of the writer’s extraordinary life. Conrad the letter writer’s invention of a substantial personality is also the task undertaken by Conrad the author, whose tales, inspired by the events of his adventurous oceangoing career, amount to a self-conscious examination and reconstruction of his own past. Acutely conscious of the self’s fragility and of his own copious and often incongruent identities (seafarer, émigré, Englishman, Pole, down-at-heel itinerant, and venerable man of letters), Conrad sought to piece together the sort of distinct, coherent personality that is endowed by an intelligible life story, in an effort to shed his discrepant selves in the figure of a true-born English gentleman. Yet this fervent Anglophile could never quite pull off that role, not just because of his Polish accent or his lugubrious self-absorption but also because of a very insistent sense of dislocation that, try as he might, he was unable to remedy. In other words, Conrad was far too complex and restless a figure to prevent his carefully formulated self-possession from being assailed and even inundated by the world’s strangeness and disorder.

The uncertainty and angst that we suffer in our dealings with the outside world, but also the exhilarating sense of discovery we experience in those encounters, are for Said the perennial themes of Conrad’s fiction. Not the least important reason for the feeling of dislocation and even bewilderment that is both dramatized and imparted by Conrad’s oeuvre is the profound struggle he joined by choosing to write in an adopted language, one in which he occasionally sounded, despite his formidable eloquence, more like a rather melodramatic outsider than a composed native. His prose foregrounds its awkwardness and disorientation by groping, frequently in vain, for a precise expression of his intention and an adequate description of his world. Nouns in Conrad’s work are frequently preceded by a surfeit of de-
criptive terms because, for the linguistic newcomer, the right word can never quite be found, so his prose often reads like a large gathering of adjectives attempting without success to elucidate an array of mysterious persons and events. Conrad's was the lavishly descriptive prose of an apprehensive interloper struggling to put into unfamiliar words both his outlandish experiences and the mysteries they led him to contemplate. His attempt to compose a secure personality and a settled milieu for that personality to live within are repeatedly destabilized by a nagging sense of displacement and consequent perplexity. The powerful effect of his novels and the considerable excitement and profit of reading them are attributable to this remarkable facility for using an unsuccessfully concealed deracination to evoke the difficulties and anxieties, as well as the equally profound rewards and opportunities, of a self-conscious personality. Conrad's identity was too unmanageable and his temperament too desirous of ordeals to allow him to seek extended refuge in comfortable residences and occupations. In his fiction, such accommodations cannot be found (at least without irony) and emotions and experiences can never find definitive expression.

This quality in Conrad was what influenced and even guided Said's subsequent work, to the extent that he found himself “over the years reading and writing about Conrad like a cantus firmus, a steady groundbass to much that I have experienced” (Said 2000a: 555). Conrad's fiction and the example of his life gave Said a modus operandi. They furnished him with examples, to which he repeatedly returned, of the audacity, inquisitiveness, and excited discomposure that drive any moral or intellectual endeavor. Conrad's life and body of work were poised between identity and its dissolution, between, as Said says in Beginnings, authority and its molestation (Said 1997a: 83–84). The writer's life and work evidence, therefore, not a carefully regulated accord between a self-possessed, rational being and his governable environment but a fraught, inconclusive negotiation between an individual's extremely vulnerable sense of selfhood and his conspicuously eventful life. This vulnerability gives rise to frailty and disquiet but also, in equal measure, to adventure, exploration, and wisdom.

“THE PALESTINIAN VISION”

Edifying encounters with one's world, such as those of Conrad and of his intrepid protagonists, necessitate the aptitudes that Said attributes to “worldliness.” Moral and political actions, no less than scholarship, presuppose a mind-set that is both outgoing and self-conscious, at once curious about alternative perspectives and receptive to the correction of one's own. The sort of improving dialogue that is made possible by exiling oneself from received ways of seeing, thinking, and acting also constitutes the foundation of a desirable political order, one that is democratic, egalitarian, committed to upholding the rights of all its members, and, because of its
dedication to those principles, disinclined to exclude groups arbitrarily from their shelter. In this view, we discern the link between Said's method and his political vision; for the want of dialogue that gives rise to insular scholarship also hobbles the so-called peace process in the land of his birth and perpetuates the violence and inequality that disfigure that region.

Said wished to see the Palestinians assume their full rights as equal participants in dialogue, entitled to demand far more than the stingy provisions of the Oslo Accords. Since 1993 they have, he argued, been bound by a deal that takes no account of this equal standing and that seeks not to establish peace but to effect pacification. The Palestinian people are routinely treated as an inconvenient complication; they are seen not as partners in the pursuit of a just settlement but as a bothersome obstacle in the way of Israeli objectives (Said 1995a; 1995b; 2002). Time and again, Said pointed out the lopsided nature of the negotiations between the two parties, a dialogue distorted both by the disproportionate military and political clout of the Israelis and by the Palestinian leadership's acceptance of a subsidiary role. Not only did one side approach the negotiations determined to exploit its strength and influence, but the other approached them not as a party convinced of the rightness of its cause but as supplicants expected and, alas, frequently willing to petition for crumbs. Effective negotiators, Said argued, ought to reject this profitless stance and approach their disputant as articulate, proficient representatives of a just cause and of a people convinced of its own prerogative. He believed that the Palestinian struggle could be successfully concluded by genuine dialogue, rather than by the leadership's throwing itself at the mercy of discredited interlocutors or seeking, against insurmountable odds and in contravention of its democratic ideals, to overpower its adversary by force of arms. Neither mendicants nor fanatics will carry the struggle, which can—and Said would doubtless have added should—be won only from a position of moral strength. Said was convinced that both parties’ attitudes are susceptible to moral and intellectual persuasion. In his many writings on the issue, he advised his readers forcefully and creatively to assert Palestinian rights, to stand firm against the occupation by other than apocalyptic and desperate means, to formulate secular and democratic alternatives to the failed policies of the Palestinian leadership, to mobilize international opinion, and to impress the conscience of persuadable Israelis with the Palestinian people's human and political claims. He saw hope not in belligerent, theocratic factions but in creative groups like the West-Eastern Divan Workshop (the orchestra of young Palestinian and Israeli musicians jointly founded by Said and the Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim), in the revision of Zionist myths by Israeli historians, and in popular movements like Israeli draft resistance, the International Solidarity Movement, and the Palestinian National Initiative of Dr. Moustafa Barghouti.

Partisan postures and sectional ambitions attracted Said's derision. He accused the Palestinian Authority of a loss of vision and berated it for tolerating a lack of
democracy, real freedom, and due process and for neglecting the rights and aspirations of Palestinian women. All this, he contended, was a result of the Oslo Accords’ deliberate substitution of strictly short-term nationalist goals for long-term social aspirations. The end of emancipation became the national flag on the sleeve of the policeman and over the headquarters of the chief’s myriad security forces, rather than, as Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth envisaged, the liberation of consciousness, the equalization of shares, and the increasing internationalization of institutions and outlooks (Fanon 1990). Said considered Arafat’s municipal aspirations and factional maneuverings to be distractions from the far more urgent task of outlining proposals for an exemplary and peaceful coexistence. Moreover, his condemnation of Zionism’s unconscionable ambitions for a Greater Israel were matched by an equally uncompromising disapproval of that minority of his compatriots who had resorted to demanding the unfeasible and ultimately quite barbaric expulsion of those who had arrived since 1948. For Said, restitution for the forcibly deracinated Palestinians was emphatically not to take place at the expense of others’ comparable dispossession. “The Palestinian people . . . wishes no negative form of self-determination or liberation for itself. Its bitter national experience has bred in it a respect for civil and human rights abrogated by others. The Palestinian vision therefore is predicated upon democracy and justice, upon dignity and community . . . For its part the Palestinian people wishes for no more than peace and justice, and because its unhappy fate was forced on it, there has arisen a congruent desire to end, rather than perpetuate, the anomalies of displacement, dispossession and exile” (Said et al. 2001: 292).

An exiled people cannot magically restore a native realm now extant only in the nostalgia of its former inhabitants, at least not without doing violence to others. Significantly, Said also opposed the segregation of the two peoples into partitioned zones, which would be a deprivation on a human level and, since they are now physically inseparable, impossible on a practical level. The only just objective, therefore, is a democratic, inclusive, and peaceable curtailment of exile and antagonism. The authentic “Palestinian vision” is of a new, unpartitioned state. “If we think of Palestine as having a function of both a place to be returned to and of an entirely new place, a vision partially of a restored past and of a novel future, perhaps even of a historical disaster transformed into a hope for a different future, we will understand the word’s meaning better” (Said 1992: 125).

Said’s alternative to partition, mutual incomprehension, and unceasing strife is a community without civil distinctions, a secular state embracing the present inhabitants of Israel and the occupied territories plus those members of the Palestinian diaspora (that is, the refugees and their descendants) who wish to return. He proposed a country that belongs to all its citizens and is not just a sectarian sanctuary for its professed titleholders, a country that constitutes a revolutionary example of reconciliation instead of a byword for internecine bloodshed.
THE GLOBAL VISION

The cosmopolitan visions generated by intellectual exile help us combat three significant dangers, in my view. The first is the resurgence of national, racial, and religious fundamentalism. In “The Clash of Definitions,” Said took issue with Samuel Huntington’s (1996) fanciful “clash of civilizations” thesis (a sort of nightmarish Orwellian vision of gigantic power blocs slugging it out with each other for global dominance). This ideologue’s division of the globe into exclusive zones riled Said because of its utterly baseless assumption that citizens within an arbitrarily defined space are all so like- and simpleminded that they march in line behind the same banners. Regions, however, are so multiform that they defy such crude generalization. Sweeping shorthands like “the West” and the “Islamic world” close our eyes both to the laudable diversity of beliefs and practices in supposedly homogeneous camps and to the more regrettable partitions and hierarchies that characterize life in each purportedly uniform zone. Racial, confessional, class, gender, and numerous other divisions complicate Huntington’s simplistic belief that we are all drones confined to our hives. Huntington is a dealer in abstractions, not a sensitive perciptent; he writes not as a dispassionate student of the wider world but as a scaremongering guardian of parochial values from the threat of phantom foes and, ultimately, as a bellicose justifier of American power (Said 2000a: 569–90). The division of the world into a patchwork of discrepant regions obscures our interrelatedness, masks the power and violence that connect the world’s parts, and cynically discounts the possibility of more equitable and fraternal forms of relationship. The most objectionable aspect of Huntington’s idea is its complete occlusion of capitalism and its attempt to justify America’s belligerent foreign policy not on the hard-to-defend grounds of imperial power but on the utterly spurious ones of civilizational survival.

The second danger that exile helps us avoid is the understandable but ultimately quite disastrous temptation to recoil from triumphalist dogmas and imperialist projects into a fretful disillusionment with the very idea of noncoercive cultural contact. Not only have belligerent neoconservatives depicted civilizations as incorrigible and irreconcilable antagonists but so have tolerant relativists who wish that cultures were inoculated against the temptations of violent interaction. But militant identity politics’ vision of a diversity of unconnected and uncommunicative identities plays right into Huntington’s hands and thus runs counter to Said’s polemic against separation.

Political separation is at best a makeshift measure. Partition is a legacy of imperialism, as the unhappy cases of Pakistan and India, Ireland, Cyprus, and the Balkans amply testify, and as the disasters of twentieth-century Africa attest in the most tragic way. We must now begin to think in terms of coexistence, after separation, in spite of partition . . . So let us see these new partitions as the last-ditch efforts of a dying ide-
ology of separation, which has afflicted Zionism and Palestinian nationalism, both of whom have not surmounted the philosophical problem of the Other, of learning how to live with, as opposed to despite, the Other. (Said 2002: 330)

Said took issue with the transformation of diversity into a fetish, for the abstract affirmation of “difference” serves only to slight the enormous potential of the idea of community. In other words, political activity should not come down to an unappealing choice between imposed uniformity and what Said called the “ideology of difference.” “On the crucial issue of ‘difference,’ which is central to many recent theoretical and interpretive discussions, one can, however, declare oneself for difference (as opposed to sameness or homogenization) without at the same time being for the rigidly enforced and policed separation of populations into different groups” (Said 1995b: 80–81).

Separatist rhetoric has engendered “a critique whose premise is the need for forging connections and, more important, the existential need to find modes of knowledge, coexistence, and justice that are not based on coercive separation and unequal privilege” (Said 1995b: 83). In other words, we should press not just for the right of individuals and cultures to be different but also for their right to be the same, to enjoy the same rights and freedoms and to be treated with equal dignity and respect. To argue that diversity is desirable in all cases is manifestly absurd. Individuals and even whole communities have talents, potentials, and inclinations that are distinctive and sometimes unique; to fight for the opportunity for them to explore fully these divergent gifts is a worthy endeavor and, in Said’s view, the primary objective of political action. Yet for such differences to flourish, others have to be abolished. For example, I am unlikely to be able to pursue my unfulfilled talent for playing the oboe if I have to work sixteen hours a day because I am not allowed to join a trade union or because I do not have enough to eat. We might draw two conclusions in this situation: first, that without exception, men and women should be allowed to join trade unions, and second, that the difference between those who have food and those who do not should be removed. In short, some differences should be eradicated so that those that really matter can flourish. Said’s universalism, therefore, does not encourage homogeneity but seeks to lay down the conditions that must universally prevail for the general fulfillment of life’s basic necessities and the pursuit of genuine difference. “We have to ensure the means of life, and the means of community,” as Raymond Williams avowed. “But what will then, by these means, be lived, we cannot know or say” (1962: 321).

The third objectionable idea that Said’s distinctive cosmopolitan vision helps us reject is the temptation to exchange the conflict-ridden reality of our time for a precipitate celebration of the cosmopolitan ideal. Notwithstanding their best intentions, writers like Bhabha who hymn an extant cosmopolitan condition have a tendency
to glide free of worldly affiliations into a sort of intercontinental latitude. Theirs is a weightless detachment from territorial boundaries and from any commitment to alleviating the plight of the vast majority of humankind that continues to live without the privileges of unlimited foreign travel or the luxury of exchanging the arduous task of political struggle for the pleasures of movement. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri argue that a new decentered and supranational polity is being brought about by the “multitude,” a planetary flow of workers moving from the poor to the rich countries: “The real heroes of the liberation of the Third World may really have been the emigrants and the flows of population that have destroyed old and new boundaries” (Hardt and Negri 2001: 362–63). For Hardt and Negri, immigration and the crossing of borders give rise to a form of cosmopolitan freedom. However, they forget something that Said emphasizes: although migration might be a partly salutary experience (allowing the migrant a penetrating perspective on his new locale as well as critical distance from the place he has left behind), most likely it will mean little more than penury, painful deracination, even death. The euphoric celebration of unfettered movement pays insufficient attention to the barriers that currently impede the movements of individuals and populations, the unenviable material conditions of actual migrants and forcibly relocated communities, and the vast populations condemned to the stasis of factory production, subsistence farming, and unemployment (see Abu-Manneh 2003; Brennan 2003; Parry 2004a, 2004b: 93–103). “If the new exterritoriality of the elite feels like intoxicating freedom,” writes Zygmunt Bauman, “the territoriality of the rest feels less like home ground, and ever more like prison—all the more humiliating for the obtrusive sight of the others’ freedom to move” (1999: 23). Just as there can be, as Adorno remarked, “no emancipation without that of society” (1974: 173) there can likewise be, as Said makes eloquently clear, no viable or legitimate cosmopolitanism that excludes the vast majority.

Much more productive and useful is a new global mentality that sees the dangers we face from the standpoint of the whole human race. These dangers include the pauperization of most of the globe’s population; the emergence of virulent local, national, ethnic, and religious sentiment . . . ; the decline of literacy and the onset of a new illiteracy . . . ; the fragmentation and threatened disappearance of the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment. Our most precious asset in the face of such a dire transformation of tradition and of history is the emergence of a sense of community, understanding, sympathy, and hope which is the direct opposite of what in his essay Huntington has provoked . . . In what they imply, these sentiments prepare the way for a dissolution of cultural barriers as well as of the civilizational pride that prevents the kind of benign globalism already to be found, for instance, in the environmental movement, in scientific cooperation, in the universal concern for human rights, in concepts of global thought that stress community and sharing over racial, gender, or class dominance. (Said 2000a: 589–90)
“NEW IDEAS AND PROVOCATIONS”

The democratic, cosmopolitan, and universalist ideals of Said’s thought offer a salutary alternative to paranoid dogmas of cultural, racial, and national self-assertion. Yet if we are to stand a realistic chance of achieving these ideals, we must combine their avowal with the most hardheaded acknowledgment of the impediments that currently forestall their realization. Peter Gowan argues that the liberal vision of globalization, in its failure to keep these obstacles in sight, is all too compatible with—indeed, is often used as rhetorical cover for—the selfish interests of powerful states. The cosmopolitan vision will not be realized while international relations and trade continue to be shaped by the United States and its subsidiaries. Indeed, the extant institutions of global governance are not brakes on but rather instruments of U.S. power. The manipulation of compliant organizations like the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and the U.N. Security Council leads not to fair trade or respect for human rights but to belligerent and protectionist policies that perpetuate violence and inequality. We need, therefore, to add an agenda for economic and social change to the planetary ethos and international democratic institutions envisaged by the various liberal cosmopolitanisms (Gowan 2004). We should follow Fernando Coronil in contrasting globalization’s ideals of equality, diversity, and liberty with the social inequity and cultural and political standardization that capitalist globalization currently engenders (Coronil 2000: 369). Held to its promise, as Immanuel Wallerstein has suggested, the laudable liberal ideal of globalization would cease to be associated solely with powerful states’ self-interested reconstruction of the world and would instead allow us “to arrive hopefully at a more inclusively universalist vision of human possibility” (1997: 107). Therefore, we need a kind of “globalization-from-below,” designed not to facilitate capital accumulation and thus perpetuate inequality but to protect labor rights and environmental standards and to enhance the prospects of peace and democracy (Brecher and Costello 1994; Colás 1994; Gilroy 2005).

Though Said’s generous and often angry compassion for imperialism’s victims was exemplary and inspiring, he seemed more comfortable reproving insularity, chauvinism, and xenophobia than combining his distaste for these things with a cogent and candid critique of the economic system that encourages them. I think he realized in his later work, particularly in the excoriating rage in From Oslo to Iraq and the Roadmap at the bellicose simplifications of the Bush administration and the brutal folly of Ariel Sharon, that material and strategic interests of a very fundamental kind drive American policy in the Middle East just as, at an earlier stage in history, they compelled European depredations in Africa and Asia. To avoid the precipitate optimism censured by Gowan, we should stress Said’s belated stress on the vast social, economic, and political obstacles that stand between his ideals and the prospect of their realization. Alternatively, we might combine Said’s em-
phasis on dialogue, community, and reconciliation with Adorno’s refusal, even in his analyses of philosophical method and musical form, to let out of his sight the unrelenting actuality and maleficence of capitalism.

One gets the impression when reading Adorno that his cantankerous aversion to consolations and simplifications of any kind is connected to the interminable postponement, to which his work alerts us, of meaningful social change. He finds this sense of unfinished tasks in the intransigent and, in some cases, formally unresolved works of great modernist composers like Mahler, Schoenberg, Berg, and even Wagner, who all trace their aptitude for incompleteness to the fractured fabric of Beethoven’s revolutionary late style. “To the musical experience of the late Beethoven the unity of subjectivity and objectivity, the roundedness of the successful symphony, the totality arising from the motion of all particulars, in short, that which gives the works of his middle period their authenticity, must have become suspect. . . . Something in his genius, probably the deepest thing, refused to reconcile in the image what is unreconciled in reality” (1998: 151–52).

In Beethoven’s irascible and recondite late works, the thematic resolutions of his middle period are indefinitely postponed (see Sample 1994; Paddison 1993: 233–43; Nicholsen 1997). Late style, in Adorno’s account, is both an unavoidable misfortune in the life of the composer, who in consciousness of his own mortality ceases to impose his will on the artistic material and thus reveals its imperfect and disunited character, and a seismic event in the history of culture, which at some point in the nineteenth century began to register in its form the antagonistic quality of a society divided into classes. The transition from Beethoven’s classical to his late style reveals in aesthetic form a lack of polish, beauty, and harmony. Reprises seem forced or are ironic. Such late works are exceedingly rebarbative, truculently dismissive of youth’s glib enthusiasms. They deliberately frustrate the urge for harmonious closure and even the expectation of understanding. Yet their fragmentariness and their sheer bristling difficulty are useful in refusing us the sort of appeasement and consolation furnished by more beguilingly melodious compositions and in notifying us aesthetically of the intense dissatisfaction occasioned by a similarly conflict-ridden and unreformed social order.

To be late, in Adorno’s view, is therefore to observe the world with the wisdom and perhaps the disappointment but also the indignation of experience. Indeed, according to Said’s own meditations on lateness, it is the preternatural sagacity of old age and even the unflinching consciousness of imminent death that imbue the senescent artist with an uncommon aptitude for facing facts, refusing the bromide of false consolation, relinquishing nostalgic dreams and precipitate visions. “Beethoven’s late works remain unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis: they do not fit any scheme, and they cannot be reconciled or resolved. . . . Lateness is being at the end, fully conscious, full of memory, and also very (even preternaturally) aware of the present. Adorno, like Beethoven, becomes therefore a figure of lateness itself,
an untimely, scandalous, even catastrophic commentator on the present” (Said 2006: 12, 14).

Said was such a commentator, particularly in his own late works: impatient with consooing fancies, intolerant of deceptions, and, in his own terms, preternaturally mindful of the present. In *Freud and the Non-European*, he acclaimed the developing variations of the intellectual and artistic work in progress above the finale’s soothing strains: “The intellectual trajectory of the late work is intransigence and a sort of irascible transgressiveness, as if the author was expected to settle down into a harmonious composure, as befits a person at the end of his life, but preferred instead to be difficult, and to bristle with all sorts of new ideas and provocations” (2003: 29). I claim that Said’s esteem for recalcitrant virtuosos and their insightful compositions evidences his increasing consciousness that his political ideal of reconciliation necessitated an unflinching acknowledgment of the present inequitable order and all its attendant chauvinisms, and that until a homeland healed of the painful frontiers of class, racial, gender, and geographical division has been inaugurated, his lifelong project, like Beethoven’s fragmented and unreconciled final quartets and piano sonatas, would remain incomplete.

By emphasizing Said’s attraction to revelations of incompleteness rather than premature feats of harmony, I do not mean that he was uninterested in reconciliation, because as I have been arguing, reconciliation constituted his life’s work. Instead I suggest that at its best, his work was conscious that genuine reconciliation has not yet been achieved and, moreover, can only be accomplished by insisting on true democracy and equality. As he noted, the Palestinians cannot achieve their goals by making a hasty settlement with the status quo. “I am for dialogue between cultures and coexistence between people: everything I have written about and struggled for has pointed to that as the goal. But I think real principle and real justice have to be implemented before there can be true dialogue. Real dialogue is between equals not between subordinate and dominant partners” (Said 1995a: 36–37).

Unless the Palestinians decline to pursue an accommodation with a fanatically self-assured Israeli state that, armed to the teeth and indulged by the world’s sole superpower, is currently highly unlikely to treat such concessions with anything other than bad faith, they could sell short what Said saw as their exemplary vision. As I write, in the first months of 2008, the “dialogue” that intermittently takes place between the two sides’ representatives has recently been reconvened, with the Palestinians’ leaders compelled once more to swallow the usual threats and to thrust aside their people’s entitlements. The Palestinians are again and again compelled to listen to the hypocritical sermons of their occupiers, to submit uncomplainingly to yet another round of raids and random killings, and to bear without respite the unending occupation, the erection of the West Bank barrier, and their incarceration in shrinking and dismembered plots—all for the dubious privilege of sitting at Barak’s or Sharon’s or Olmert’s groaning tables and, if they are lucky, catching some
of their crumbs. The exercise is, as ever, a fraudulent and ineffectual colloquy because it takes no account of Palestinian entitlements and sufferings and imposes no obligation on Israel to recognize those things and to heed its responsibilities under international law. Until equality is contrived—until, that is, Israel stops belligerently asserting its preeminence and the Palestinian leadership ceases to rescind voluntarily rights and claims that, under any number of international covenants and resolutions, are indefeasible—then the halting dialogue of the interminable “peace process” will continue to be a cruel sham. Therefore, in drawing attention to Said’s growing conviction that democracy and reconciliation can be achieved only in the company of radical democratic equality, I do not wish suggest that these ideals be postponed. Genuine dialogue cannot wait, but if it is to realize its true potential, we must use the sense of reconciliation and solidarity that frequently illuminates the situation in Palestine and that increasingly characterizes grassroots political organization and informs the ubiquitous discourse of human rights, as a beginning and not an end, a model for the organization of society and not a substitute for or distraction from ambitious political action.

I have tried to describe the critical consciousness and intellectual deliberation engendered for Said by the experience of exile and to clarify the political ideal that such experiences imply. I have argued that exile ought not to result in a relativist dismissal of political norms, an acceptance of separation, or a premature celebration of an extant cosmopolitan condition. It should rather lead us toward Ahdaf Soueif’s “common ground”: that is, toward a far more internationalist and even universalist vision of human solidarity that is nevertheless acutely conscious of the obstacles that prevent us from reaching this spacious meeting point (Souief 2004). For these reasons, Said courted exile. His was an unaccommodated voice amid a disheartening choir of consensus, complicity, and cynicism. In this context, we should recall that the critical consciousness aroused by important artists’ late work is also the indispensable precondition of another very Saidian notion, that of a new beginning, a fresh start even in the midst of apparently irreversible defeats. As he makes clear in the closing moments of his memoir, Out of Place, uncommon alertness and farsightedness are characteristics not just of the rebel who rages against the dying of the light but also of the harbinger, who rises early to steal a march on the approaching dawn. “For me, sleep is death, as is any diminishment in awareness. . . . Sleeplessness for me is a cherished state to be desired at almost any cost; there is nothing for me as invigorating as immediately shedding the shadowy half-consciousness of a night’s loss, than the early morning, reacquainting myself with or resuming what I might have lost completely a few hours earlier” (2000b: 295).

Said willingly embraced the fate of the exile, the unsleeping traveler who perseveres through the hours of darkness, but he remained forever conscious that the possibility of homecoming lurks below the horizon. He maintained an abiding fidelity to the intellectual’s lonely, itinerant course but did not lose sight of the com-
municipal goal that sustained such activity. Said’s benefaction is the example of an incorrigible freethinker who did not seek premature refuge in political submission, disciplinary conformity, academic nearsightedness, or intellectual orthodoxy, and who refused to swear allegiance to a circumscribed and exclusionary patria. He shared Adorno’s view that “there is no longer any homeland other than a world in which no one would be cast out any more, the world of a genuinely emancipated humanity” (Adorno 1991: 85).

NOTES

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1. Timothy Brennan and Neil Lazarus persuasively distinguish the theoretical and political principles of Said’s work from those of his postcolonial epigones (Brennan 2006: 93–125; Lazarus 2005).

2. Abdirahman Hussein is more convincing on what he calls the “critical misconception” of Orientalism: that is, its mistaken interpretation as a work of intellectual disengagement (Hussein 2002: 224–35).

3. David O’Hara agrees with this point. “The problem [Said] addresses . . . is not so much how intellectuals initially free themselves from the mental hobbles of traditional values and ideas. Rather the problem is how can critical intellectuals maintain their oppositional stance without it turning into an oppositional posture habitually adopted and elaborated—refined—in the interest of perfecting their systems and methodologies . . . at the center of which appear their own idealized self-images as writers” (O’Hara 1984: 389).

4. Bhabha sings the praises of “wandering peoples who will not be contained within the Heim of the national culture and its unisonant discourse, but are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the modern nation” (1990: 164).

5. For a compelling analysis of how in his travel writing Naipaul enlists the idiom of exile and displacement to conceal his approval of orthodox colonialist beliefs about postcolonial societies, see Nixon 1992.

6. For an account of the often duplicitous nature of Israeli negotiating tactics and of the prospects for an equitable peace, see Reinhart 2002.


8. “The aim of equalizing those circumstances over which individuals have no control is to leave them free to pursue their goals: given that these goals differ, the outcome of individuals exercising their capabilities will also be different. Equality is not uniformity. The idea that it entails the suppression of individual difference is nonsense” (Callinicos 2000: 79).

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