

Edward Said: a Remembrance and a Tribute

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I want to begin this paper on a personal note and in an intimately confessional mode. I want to make a confession about the superficial way I was attracted to Edward Said. I first stumbled upon the name “Edward Said” rather indirectly during my M.A. studies while I was reading about post-colonialism in what I think was Raman Selden’s succinct yet profoundly informative *A Reader’s Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*.¹ The first thing that arrested my attention was the anomalous juxtaposition of a Western name (Edward) with an Arabic one (Said). The exquisite combination intrigued me to know more about him and his ideas.

Said and his masterpiece *Orientalism*² dominated my early reading in post-colonialism and to some extent formed the backbone of my Master’s dissertation where I compared the post-colonial with the postmodern theories in a crude and naive comparative study.

Said and *Orientalism*

Part of my dissertation was devoted to a postmodern look at Said’s *Orientalism*, which revolved around the use of the concept of “simulation” by Said to describe the representational mode of textual re-presentation of the East by the West. Said’s attribution of simulative quality to the construction of the East by Western scholars resonated alluringly with the idea of “simulation” introduced by Jean Baudrillard. By attempting to demonstrate the link between reality and representation, Said in *Orientalism*, to my mind, follows a postmodern strategy. A holistic view of his work displays an analogy between the theory of Orientalism and Baudrillard’s theory of simulacrum. Just as Baudrillard³ believes that the involvement of images in cyclic representational processes leads first to the reflection of reality, secondly to perversion, then to the concealment of the absence of reality, and, finally, to the creation of a simulation of that, Said implies that the same procedure is working in a textual way – the image that is produced in a text is of an abstract (mental) nature. Baudrillard proposes that a simulacrum is not unreal or false representation but it “never again exchange[s] for what is real, but exchange[s] in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.”⁴ The referent of representation is the real but the referent of a simulacrum is another image. Simulations are the product of a successive layering of images which becomes so convoluted that telling the real from the image is hardly possible.

The death of the real (the Orient) in *Orientalism* constitutes the core of Said’s argument. Said maintains that to overcome the Orient, it should be first “possessed, then re-created by scholars, soldiers and judges” who embarked upon the excavation of “forgotten languages, histories, races and cultures in order to posit them [...] as the true classical Orient that could be used to judge and

rule the modern Orient.”⁵ There are two noteworthy points here: (a) the re-creation of the Orient through the biased and subjective point of view of particular groups, and (b) the re-creation based on an old, trite and fixed image inherited from the predecessors in the respective field.

The current and real Orient once for all is put aside. In its place an image is mounted which itself is an image produced at second hand while being passed down to scholars, writers, etc., who instead of referring to the real Orient are generally content with the representational legacy of the past or are too complacent to double-check their inferred findings. Sacy's case (a French Orientalist) is a good case in point:

[A]s a European he ransacked the Oriental archives, and he could do so without leaving France. What texts he isolated, he then brought back; he doctored them; then he annotated, codified, arranged, and commented on them. In time, the Orient as such became less important than what the Orientalist made of it; thus, drawn by Sacy into the scaled discursive place of a pedagogical tableau, the Orientalist's Orient was thereafter reluctant to emerge into reality.⁶

There is a parallel paradigm here which is comparable to Baudrillard's conception of simulation. It implies that the superimposition of textual layers ends in a simulation of the real. Apart from this general impression, Said explicitly points to the generation of simulacrum in the representational process of scholarly undertakings of the orientalists:

[O]n the one hand, Orientalism acquired the Orient as literally and as widely as possible; on the other, it domesticated this knowledge to the West, filtering it through regulatory codes, classifications, specimen cases [...] all of each together formed a *simulacrum* of the Orient and reproduced it materially in the West, for the West.⁷

Said gives us an insight into the *modus operandi* of the Orientalists' epistemological efforts involved in the construction of the orient in the mind of the West.

If Said was a major influence in shaping part of my academic studies, Emmanuel Levinas should definitely take the credit for the rest. *Orientalism*, with its reverse-engineering performative function, is marked with ethical considerations. By ethics here I do not mean roles of proper private or public conduct but what is defined as the relationship between the self and the other, and the person who among other scholars investigated and theorized this relationship and gave it an extreme form is no one but the Jewish French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. If we take ethics as an avoidance of a kind reductivism in dealing with the other, then Said's achievement in *Orientalism* is an ethical statement as it has been referred to in his own 2003 preface to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Orientalism*: “The point I want to conclude with now is to insist that the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like ‘America,’ ‘The West’ or ‘Islam’ and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse, cannot remain as potent as they are, and must be

opposed.”⁸ I do not want to explore ethics in *Orientalism* but my purpose is to compare Said’s ethical politics with Levinas’s political ethics.

Levinas and Alterity

Levinas explores and mulls over the history of Western philosophy to substantiate his claim that philosophy as the love of wisdom is inherently totalitarian. The entire project of philosophy from its start in Plato’s *Parmenides* through to Heidegger is awash with the desire to reduce the other into the same. The manifestations of this reductive approach are evidenced by war, particularly the Second World War, which inflicted tremendous pain and suffering on the Jews. Levinas, who lost his family members to the plight of anti-Semitism, spent some time as a prisoner of the war at a Nazi camp where he drafted his early groundbreaking ethical writings.

In recent decades Levinas’s scholarship has surged in popularity after his two magnum opuses were translated into English. *Totality and Infinity*⁹ and *Otherwise than Being*¹⁰ present the main principles of his ethics which he calls “first philosophy.” I do not intend to go into details about his complicated philosophy here. But, in short, what he means by ethics is based on an intersubjective relationship. As it was mentioned above, Levinas strives to outline a new relation between the self and the other, refusing to follow the trajectory of the Western philosophy which in his opinion betrays a tendency toward reduction and totalitarianism. Levinas envisions a relation between the same and the other in which the other is always one step ahead of the self. Thus he argues that tools employed by the mind to comprehend the other in fact reduce it to certain limited categories. To escape this reductive approach, Levinas has no choice but to place the other far beyond the self’s comprehension, describing it in terms of infinity and attributing to it an excess which is never comprehended by the mind. It is because of this incomprehensibility that the self should hold itself responsible for the other to the point of death and annihilation.

Reading Levinas, one is struck with the vigor and passion with which he describes one’s irrecusable responsibility towards a transcendent other. The relation between the self and the other is illustrated by Levinas in terms of proximity, emphasizing the simultaneous separation and connection of them. Levinas argues fervently about the existence of an asymmetrical relation between the self and the other. He tries to deconstruct our conception of the truth, history, justice, language, subjectivity, etc., through a series of arguments which locate the origin of all these notions in one’s being addressed by the other and thus summoned to justify his presence and place. In short, we are already accused of failing to fulfill our commitments toward the other even before we encounter or perceive it.

Said and Levinas in Perspective

Said and Levinas are interesting cases of comparison from different points of view. Said and Levinas led a life in exile. They both experienced displacement. Levinas was subject to persecution on account of being a Jew before and during the Second World War. He derived his

philosophy from Talmudic teachings. He managed to incorporate his religious background with his intellectual career. After the war, he endorsed the formation of Israel and came to be known as a towering figure in ethics. Said was a Palestinian-born Christian whose downright opposition to the state of Israel was loud and clear from the beginning. He was an active supporter of the rights of Palestinians. Now the interesting part about Said and Levinas is that in the realm of theory they tend to argue in favor of recognizing the right of the other. They draw attentions to the inadequacy of representational tools and their biased reductivism. As a philosopher, Levinas's ethics sound much too other-worldly and esoteric.

No matter how promising and humanitarian and at the same time implausibly, impractically, and inconceivably demanding and strenuous Levinasian ethics appears on paper, it only takes one important yet tragic event to put his lofty ideas to the test. Throughout his writings Levinas does not specify who "the other" is for him. Having survived and witnessed the horrendous ordeal of the Shoah, Levinas's "other" looms as an uncanny entity whose face serves as an ethical command on its own. Contrary to his writings, Levinas employs double standards when it comes to applying his ethical injunctions in real-life situations. As such "the other" for Levinas, in order to be "the other" of the face-to-face encounter, requires certain qualifications.

Levinas's worldview, unlike the idealism of his philosophy, suffers from myopia if not self-inflicted blindness, as it seems to be tainted with hesitation and abstention. He doesn't sound as vocal as one who has read his grandiose words on the superiority of "the other" expects him to be. Let me cite an example. In an interview on Radio Communauté on 28 September 1982, which was conducted in the wake of Sabra and Chatila massacre, Alain Finkielkraut, using the phrase "the temptation of innocence,"¹¹ questions the grounds on which the state of Israel justifies its acts of brutality by referring to its history of victimhood. Levinas seems to prevaricate on the matter and never condescends to explicitly condemn the massacre at the camps, failing to speak "of the direct guilt." Later in the interview, Shlomo Malka, the program's presenter, puts the following question to Levinas: "Emmanuel Levinas, you are the philosopher of the 'other.' Isn't history, isn't politics the very site of the encounter with the 'other,' and for the Israeli, isn't the 'other' above all the Palestinian?"¹²

Levinas's answer doesn't touch the right chord:

My definition of the other is completely different. The other is the neighbor, who is not necessarily kin, but who can be. And in that sense, if you're for the other, you're for the neighbor. But if your neighbor attacks another neighbor or treats him unjustly, what can you do? Then alterity takes on another character, in alterity we can find an enemy, or at least then we are faced with the problem of knowing who is right and who is wrong, who is just and who is unjust. There are people who are wrong.¹³

Levinas's non-committal reply alerts us to be cautious about an unquestioned endorsement of a public intellectual. Obviously there is a disparity between grandiloquent pontification and

practicing what one has preached. In the case of Levinas, his “reactions seem to fail the test of his own rigorous ethics.”¹⁴

Now let me get back to Said by changing the scene. It is the year 2003 and the venue is the University of Washington. It is The Walker-Ames Lecture Series and Said is answering Dr. Hollerun’s questions about the historical claim of Zionists to the land of Israel. Said’s answer is a reiteration and affirmation of an ethically informed solution. He simply argues that the Jewish claim is “a claim among many others.”¹⁵ Said explains that there are many who rightfully have claims to the ownership of the land on the grounds of their historical residence. Said adds that choosing one claim and backing it up by professing that God has approved of it is preposterous. Religion can never be used to buttress such claims. Said’s argument is rooted in his belief that no claim overrides others. The equality and equity of Said’s solution is a poignant reminder of the inefficiency of approaches that are grounded on the insistence on the separability of Arabs and Jews, stemming from a disposition to dichotomization of the self/same and the other.

My point here is that Said is more politically ethical than Levinas, who is noted for promoting an ethics of alterity. Said jeopardizes his academic and intellectual fame by principally taking a position of non-positionality which establishes continuity between politics and ethics about which Levinas seems to be reluctant or doubtful of. As Hochberg has emphatically maintained in his article exploring the “ethical implications of Said’s investment in memory as a means for political intervention,”¹⁶ Said is wedded to a conviction that neutralizes enmity through the occurrence of a mutual comprehension, recognition, and identification between the Arabs and the Jews. Hochberg quotes important lines from Said which embody Said’s opinion:

[N]o Arab today has an identity that can be unconscious of the Jew, that can rule out the Jew as a psychic factor in the Arab identity; conversely, I think, no Jew can ignore the Arab in general, nor can he immerse himself in his ancient tradition and lose the Palestinian Arab and what Zionism has done to him. The more intense the modern struggles for identity, the more attention is paid by the Arab or the Jew to his chosen opponent, or partner. *Each is the other.*¹⁷

The last line is highly important as it is charged with ethical significance. Unlike Levinas, whose conception of the other in the political realm is subject to variation and arbitrary adjudication, Said’s stance skips the entanglement of the abstraction of theory and offers a practical ethical solution.

I think Said owes this particular worldview to his life in exile, which enables him to disentangle himself from allegiance to any sides of disputes. John Barbour argues that according to Said exile creates “a scrupulous subjectivity, independence of mind, critical perspective and originality of vision. Being attuned to more than one culture can give the exile ‘contrapuntal’ awareness of simultaneous dimensions of reality.”¹⁸ Ashcroft explains that as an exiled intellectual Said is concerned with his location in the world:

This is the core of worldliness, which itself is the driving energy of all Said's work. Both text and critic have a location from which and within which they speak. Worldliness demands a Secular Criticism, not bound to the priestly rites of High Theory [...] No matter how strongly intellectuals may believe that their interests are of "higher things or ultimate values," he contends, the morality of the intellectual's practice begins with its location in the secular world and is affected by "where it takes place, whose interests it serves, how it jibes with a consistent and universalist ethic, how it discriminates between power and justice, what it reveals of one's choices and priorities."¹⁹

Although Levinas, inspired by the Talmudic teachings, imputed divine positionality to the other by transcendentalizing it, in practice he falls short of acknowledging their worldly existence and as a result presents a lopsided argument. Whereas Said rejects the abstraction of theory, or reliance on any "High Theory" which could sanctify one's position, and thus demonstrates a deeper and more practical ethical responsibility than Levinas as the most prominent Jewish philosopher and theoretician of ethics of the previous century.

To conclude this paper, let me get back to the beginning and the appeal of the names "Edward" and "Said." Just as his first name and last name counterpoint each other, Said has been able to project a contrapuntal look on world affairs. In an interview with an Israeli daily in 2000, Said scandalized the reader by concluding that "I am the last Jewish intellectual [...] the only true follower of Adorno. [...] Let me put it this way: I am a Jewish-Palestinian."²⁰

Notes

1. Selden, Ramon. 1989. *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
2. Said, Edward. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.
3. Baudrillard, Jean. 1983. *Simulations*. Trans. Phil Beitchman, Paul Foss, and Paul Patton. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
4. Baudrillard 1983, 11.
5. Said 1978, 92.
6. Said 1978, 127–128.
7. Said 1978, 166 (my emphasis).
8. Said, Edward. 2003. *Orientalism: 25th Anniversary Edition*. New York: Vintage, xxii.
9. Levinas, Emmanuel. 1961. *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
10. Levinas, Emmanuel. 1974. *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
11. Levinas, Emmanuel. 1989. "Ethics and Politics." Trans. Jonathan Romney. *The Levinas Reader*. Ed. Seán Hand. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 290.
12. Levinas 1989, 294.
13. Levinas 1989, 294.

14. Hand, Seán. 2009. *Emmanuel Levinas*. New York: Routledge. 107.
15. Said, Edward. 2003. "Imperial Continuity – Palestine, Iraq, and U.S. Policy." The Walker-Ames Lecture Series, University of Washington. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgteoJLLihU> (accessed Oct 10, 2012).
16. Hochberg, Gil. 2006. "Edward Said: 'The Last Jewish Intellectual': On Identity, Alterity, and the Politics of Memory." *Social Text* 24.2, 48.
17. Hochberg 2006, 59.
18. Barbour, John. 2007. "Edward Said and the Space of Exile." *Literature & Theology* 21.3, 295.
19. Ashcroft, Bill. 2007. "Exile and representation: Edward Said as public intellectual." *Edward Said: The Legacy of a Public Intellectual*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 79.
20. Said qtd. in Hochberg 2006, 47.