

CĂTĂLIN CONSTANTINESCU
Universitatea „Al.I. Cuza” Iași

Perspectives on Identity and Exile: Edward Said

Edward Wadie Said (1935-2003) was one of the most prominent and influent Arab American (Palestinian-born) scholars, well-known for advocating the role of intellectuals in society – a role exemplary illustrated by himself. He insisted that the true intellectual's role must be that of the amateur, as an amateur is not stimulated by academic rewards nor pursuing a career, being capable of disinterested engagement with ideas and values. Known both for his original research in the field of comparative literature (Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, New York) and his incisive political commentary, Said regularly appeared in *The Guardian* of London, *Le Monde Diplomatique* and the Arab-language daily *al-Hayat*, printed in every Arab capital in the world.

Educated at Princeton and Harvard (Said attended in both British and American colonial schools in Cairo, before graduating from Princeton in 1957 and receiving his PhD from Harvard in 1964 – “*The Letters and Short Fiction of Joseph Conrad*”, doctoral dissertation), Said lectured at more than 150 universities and colleges in the United States, Canada and Europe, and received honorary doctorates from Bir Zeit, Chicago, Michigan, Jawaharlal Nehru, Jami'a Malleyeh, Toronto, Guelph, Edinburgh, Haverford, Warwick, Exeter, National University of Ireland and American University in Cairo. He twice received Columbia's Trilling Award and the Wellek Prize of the American Comparative Literature Association. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the Royal Society of Literature, a member of King's College, Cambridge, and an Honorary Fellow of the Middle East Studies Association. In 1999 he was President of Modern Languages Association.

His major titles include: *Beginnings* (1975), *Orientalism* (1978), *The Question of Palestine* (1980), *Covering Islam* (1981), *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983), *After the Last Sky* (1986), *Blaming the Victims* (1987), *Culture and Imperialism* (1992), *The Politics of Dispossession* (1995). His Wellek and Reith Lectures were published as, respectively, *Musical Elaborations* and *Representations of the Intellectual*. *Peace and Its Discontents* appeared in 1996, *Out of Place: A Memoir* in 1999, and *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* in 2000. *Reflections on Exile* appeared in 2000, as well as *The Edward Said Reader*, and in 2001, *Power, Politics, and Culture*. We will focus here on his *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, published in 2000.

Well-known as a learned, refined, but acid Palestinian activist, he wrote in “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals”, in “*The Nation*” (17 september 2001): “Still, just as history is never over or complete, it is also the case that some dialectical oppositions are not reconcilable, not transcendable, not really capable of being folded into a sort of higher, undoubtedly more noble, synthesis. The example closest to home for me is the struggle over Palestine, which, I have always

believed, cannot really be simply resolved by a technical and ultimately janitorial rearrangement of geography allowing dispossessed Palestinians the right (such as it is) to live in about 20 percent of their land, which would be encircled by and totally dependent on Israel. Nor, on the other hand, would it be morally acceptable to demand that Israelis should retreat from the whole of former Palestine, now Israel, becoming refugees like Palestinians all over again. No matter how I have searched for a resolution to this impasse, I cannot find one, for this is not a facile case of right versus right. It cannot be right ever to deprive an entire people of their land and heritage or to stifle and slaughter them, as Israel has been doing for the thirty-four years of its occupation. But the Jews too are what I have called a community of suffering, and brought with them a heritage of great tragedy. Yet unlike Zeev Sternhell, I cannot agree that the conquest of Palestine was a necessary conquest – the notion offends the sense of real Palestinian pain, in its own way also tragic.”

As many commentators and scholars observed, his consciousness is split between two perspectives, which provides for an interesting analysis of the Western interpretation of the East (Orient). He is deeply read in western history and literature, which undoubtedly imprinted in him western intellectuality, tradition and morality. His Palestinian roots creates the dichotomized voice and inner tension, which Said constantly attempts to negotiate.

It's obvious that Edward Said has traced the contours of the modern Diasporic Palestinian identity through his writings, political engagement, and passionate dedication to peace. It is widely accepted, especially by Palestinians, that in 2003 the Palestinian people lost a man whose seminal work helped prodigiously them to define themselves as a people with a history and culture.

Said detoured his pain away from hatred and towards a universalistic, inclusive, and secular Palestinian identity based on justice, equality, and reconciliation with the Jewish people. He called for the Jewish state to publicly acknowledge the pain that its creation and continuous colonization has brought upon the Palestinian people, and for Palestinians and Arabs to invest in understanding and engaging Jewish history and Israeli society. He remained consistent with his politics and never compromised his beliefs over his entire career, despite countless attempts by right-wing Jewish American groupings and prominent members of the Palestinian Authority establishment to silence him by any means.

Elected to the Palestine National Council (PNC) in 1977 (from which he resigned in 1991), as an independent intellectual, Said avoided taking part in the factional struggles and rejected the policy of armed struggle as unacceptable; he advocated the two-state solution, recognizing Israel's right to exist. He was the best-known and most distinguished Palestinian exile and became the subject of censorship by some representatives of his own people, an influent promoter of liberal conscience in the increasingly illiberal climate of intolerance promoted by Palestinian political movements and parties.

In all his essays and volumes, Said has criticised all systems, elucidating distinctions instead of formulating systems; paradoxically, yet not entirely odd, he was regarded as the outstanding representative of the post-structuralist left in America.

As we mentioned before, in understanding Said's vision on exile, a great attention has to be paid to Said's *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (2000) – a brilliant anthology of essays dealing with Conrad, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Nietzsche, Gramsci, Cioran, Lukacs, Barthes, Adorno, Vico, Hemingway, Blackmur, Mahfouz, Melville, Gould, Boulez, Pontecorvo, Huntington, but also with Bach, Chopin, or Schumann or *Fidelio* (for many years, he was a classical music critic, as well as a contributing writer for *The Nation*).

Said is known primarily as a literary critic and theorist. The essays in *Reflections on Exile*, written between 1967 and 2000, deal with his familiar literary themes: first of all, the social role of university education in literature and the humanities; the self-deceiving fictions cultivated by colonizers about the people they oppress; the resistance of the colonized. But Said has all along been an immersed political thinker, for whom Palestine is a central intellectual theme as well as a focus of action. Although this collection does not include Said's purely political writings, his concern with Palestine is a thread running through many of the pieces, shaping their vision of culture and education.

In his introduction, Said sets out his stand clearly and carefully, touching on all the major themes and experiences that have informed his work. By offering some autobiographical background, the author helps the reader understand those particular circumstances that molded him into one of the most visible and controversial literary scholars of our time. As he frequently maintained in papers and interviews, his identity was confined and possible in New York – his definitory place, a contradictory, but vital medium. He considers that “restless, turbulent, unceasingly various, energetic, unsettling, resistant, and absorptive, New York today is what Paris was a hundred years ago, the capital of our time. It may seem paradoxical and even willful to add that the city's centrality is due to its eccentricity and the peculiar mix of its attributes, but I think that that is so”¹.

As for his political engagement, a perilous option for an exile, Said stresses the specific dimension of doing this in the cosmopolitan, open city of New York: “The experience of 1967, the re-emergence of the Palestinian people as a political force, and my own engagement with that movement was what New York in a sense made it possible for me to live, despite the frequent death threats, acts of vandalism, and abusive behavior directed at me and my family. In that rather more agitated and urgent environment than the one fussed over tiresomely by the New York intellectuals (discredited forever, I believe, by their shoddy involvement in the cultural Cold War as managed by the CIA and so well exposed by Frances Stonor Saunders in her book *The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*), a wholly different set of concerns from those of the *Partisan Review* – for whom I wrote one of the early essays in this book – gradually surfaced in my work, coming to an explicit statement first in my book *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, then in *Orientalism*, then still more insistently in my various writings on Palestine. These concerns, I believe, were magnified and made clear by the other New York, that of the

¹ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. x.

diasporic communities from the Third World, expatriate politics, and the cultural debates, the so-called canon wars, that were to dominate academic life in the 1980s and after. In the elucidation of this other New York, either unknown or despised by its Establishment counterpart, it was also Fred Dupee who indirectly opened the way for me, not so much in what he said specifically about it but rather in the attitude of interest and encouragement that, as a deracinated, adventurous, and hospitable native-born American, he gave me, an outsider and recent arrival. The greatest single fact of the past three decades has been, I believe, the vast human migration attendant upon war, colonialism and decolonization, economic and political revolution, and such devastating occurrences as famine, ethnic cleansing, and great power machinations. In a place like New York, but surely also in other Western metropolises like London, Paris, Stockholm, and Berlin, all these things are reflected immediately in the changes that transform neighborhoods, professions, cultural production, and topography on an almost hour-by-hour basis. Exiles, émigrés, refugees, and expatriates uprooted from their lands must make do in new surroundings, and the creativity as well as the sadness that can be seen in what they do is one of the experiences that has still to find its chroniclers, even though a splendid cohort of writers that includes such different figures as Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul has already opened further the door first tried by Conrad”².

This collection brings together Said’s essays on literary and cultural topics from over three decades. As the title piece, the widely renowned “*Reflections on Exile*” makes clear, Said’s own exile and Palestinians’ fate have given both form and intimacy to the questions he has pursued. Taken together, these essays give a rare insight into the formation of a critic and the development of an intellectual vocation.

As Martha C. Nussbaum wrote: “exile is Edward W. Said’s political condition” (“The End of Orthodoxy”, in “*The New York Times*”, 28 february 2001). Even when nationhood intervenes, Said constantly opposes the idea that all forms of national identity politics are ever fully at home there. Nussbaum observed that exile may be defined, more deeply and acutely, as a condition of his mind, one that can be shared by all who resist the comfort of parochial loyalties, even when they live in the nation of their birth. For Said, exile means a critical distance from all cultural identities, a restless opposition to all orthodoxies – both those of the coloniser and those of the colonised. Moreover, it is easy to associate with Said the characteristic condition of the rootless cosmopolitan, as Tony Judt (“The Rootless Cosmopolitan: Edward Said”, in “*The Nation*”, 19 July 2004) wrote down in the columns of “*The Nation*”, citing Said’s words: “I still have not been able to understand what it means to love a country”. Here resides the source of Said’s independence. Then, exile is also a morally valuable, though painful, condition. And yet, he is extremely critical of the politics of national identity, even when the formerly oppressed are involved. At first, he argues, identity politics may be a positive type of resistance, a way of asserting the presence and the necessity to share the world, including those ignored (by the majority). But the risk after a

² *Idem*, pp. xv-xiv.

struggle is successful, is that the identity can all too easily rigidify and become an excuse for discrimination and exclusion.

For, above all, the anthology *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* is more than a portrait of an exemplary intellectual life; it provides traces of Edward Said's conception of exile and identity.

Rezumat

Chiar și după dispariția sa din 2003, cauzată de o formă rară de leucemie, Edward W. Said continuă să fascineze mediul intelectual american, scrierile sale dovedind, pe lângă erudiția unui comparatist de anvergură, nevoia de dialog intercultural, interconfesional ș.a.m.d. militant. Am încercat să conturăm câteva linii prin care și-a definit identitatea națională un exilat cu un destin excepțional: palestinian creștin, născut în Ierusalim, exilat cu familia, apoi crescut și educat în școlile britanice din Cairo, și mai apoi din Statele Unite (la Harvard și Princeton), trăind toată viața într-un New York cosmopolit și, uneori, violent, Said a oferit lumii întregi un model de angajare intelectuală, nonviolentă, exigent critică.