



*Bill Ashcroft*

## **Edward Said and cultural exile**

Zijn hele leven bleef Edward Said een culturele outcast. In onderstaand artikel gaat Bill Ashcroft in op de betekenis die deze culturele ballingschap had voor Said en zijn werk.

Edward Said was probably the most prominent intellectual 'exile' in the world in the twenty years before his death. His passing has meant the loss of one of the most effective public voices of dissent and certainly the major voice of Palestinian self-determination. This he achieved as an exile in New York, and as an exile his voice captured a world-wide audience. Exile has always played a critical role in Said's thinking about intellectuals, but more importantly, has had a fundamental impact in the development of his own work. His view of the role of the critic, the need to be 'secular', to be free from received ideologies, the centrality of 'worldliness', and his approach to culture itself are all deeply informed by his own cultural exile. Said's discovery of the 'uniquely punishing destiny' of all Palestinians occurred in 1967 during the six day war. He had been embarked on a distinguished career in Comparative Literature at Columbia University, when the war broke out, and, suddenly, he found himself an outsider, an Arab in a society that offered almost total support for the Israelis.<sup>1</sup>

This sudden experience of exile, the sudden, and, for the distinguished literature professor, unprecedented realisation that he was an outsider, changed the direction of Edward Said's career. The discovery of his own cultural exile resulted in a burst of intellectual productivity – a sustained and ground-breaking account of the history of Western representation of Arabs in general and Palestinians in particular - *Orientalism* (1978), *The Question of Palestine* (1980) and *Covering Islam* (1981). The first of these works, a contentious and combative study of the Orientalist industry of nineteenth century Europe made such an impact on thinking about colonial discourse that in the ensuing quarter century it became a pivotal account of the relationship between Europe and its others.

1 T. Ali, *Interview with Edward Said* (1994), Special Broadcasting Service, Australia.

The ambivalence of this occasion – the paradoxical nexus between the unique personal pain of exile and the intellectual production it inspired – has characterised Said's analysis of exile ever since. Exile is painful, probably most often permanent, but has been, in Said's eyes, one of the most potent motivators for intellectual productivity ever seen in Western history. This does not discount the personal and cultural pain of loss. The 'unbearable rift between a human being and a native place' means that the achievements of any exile 'are permanently undermined by his or her sense of loss.'<sup>2</sup>

Said's experience of cultural exile has become the driving force of his intellectual analysis, but it has always remained a deeply ambiguous phenomenon. In effect, exile first 'encountered' him when he had not necessarily been feeling exiled. Although away from home, exile did not grip him until the sudden and unexpected experience of cultural marginality. After all, he had left Palestine as a boy and had begun his education in Egypt, so the experience of loss was never simply nostalgia for home. Exile for Said was the discovery of 'outsideness', the sudden realisation that he lived 'between worlds.' But the idea that this New York academic could be at the same time a celebrated public intellectual and a cultural exile demonstrates the paradox of Edward Said's position. How could this elite intellectual consider himself a cultural outcast? The suddenness of his encounter with the experience of exile goes some way to explaining this: exile is not simply being away from home, it is the displacement of being intellectually, culturally and mythically ungrounded.

Said writes on the 'East', says Ella Shohat, 'as someone who has lived *fil khjarij* (in the exterior) for years, a fact which again testifies to his positioning along an almost invisible dialectical line of insider/outsider.'<sup>3</sup> In an interview with Imre Saluzinsky he says: 'My background is a series of displacements and expatriations which cannot ever be recuperated (...) I am always in and out of things, and never really of anything for very long.'<sup>4</sup> Such a position has underpinned his belief in the importance of criticism: the

- 2 Edward Said, 'The mind of winter: reflections on a life in exile', *Harper's Magazine* 269 (1984) 49-55, aldaar 49.
- 3 E. Shohat, 'Antinomies of exile: Said at the frontiers of national narrations' in: Michael Sprinker ed., *Edward Said: a critical reader* (Oxford 1992) 121-143, aldaar 122.
- 4 I. Saluzinsky ed., 'Interview with Edward Said', *Criticism in Society* (New York) 122-148, aldaar 124.

critic should 'speak truth to power' and should not be a 'joiner', should not speak from a partisan position (an ideological 'home') but should criticise power in all its manifestations. The intellectual has to strive for freedom of opinion and expression, even if it means taking a stand against one's own government, as in the Gulf War, or appearing an irascible killjoy by speaking out against the Oslo peace accord at a time when there was considerable euphoria. The intellectual follows such a path not for personal glory but to change the moral climate. 'Speaking the truth to power', says Said, 'is no panglossian idealism: it is carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one, and then intelligently representing it where it can do the most good and cause the right change.'<sup>5</sup>



Edward Said met zijn zusje in traditionele Palestijnse kledij, Jeruzalem 1941. Uit: Edward Said, *Out of place. A memoir* (Londen 1999) 144.

But with Said, exile is also something else, something formed in the process of thinking about and writing *Orientalism*. This monumental argument about the power of discourse, the power of the dominant gaze to 'produce' the reality of the Orient, is about the power of representation. Said is therefore always one who wrestles with the corrigibility of representation, who stands not just in the gaze, but in the *eye* of the dominant discourse. Exile is for him the constant ambivalence of see-er and seen, the constant need to produce a *counter-representation*, which he does in his work on orientalism,

5 Edward Said, *Culture and imperialism* (London 1993) 75.

on imperialism and as spokesman for the Palestinian cause.

Abdul JanMohamed describes Said as a 'specular border intellectual', one who might be familiar with two cultures but is unwilling or unable to be 'at home' in either.<sup>6</sup> Caught between two cultures, the specular border intellectual subjects both to scrutiny, rather than combining them as the 'syncretic' border intellectual might.<sup>7</sup> The term 'specular' is apposite for Said because his ambivalence is always an ambivalence of the gaze. In exile he occupies the space of all post-colonial writers in that he looks two ways – he is both the subject and the object of the gaze of European culture. He understands two cultures deeply but is part of neither. This crisis of *existenz*, this crisis of subjectivity more than anything describes his balancing on that 'dialectical line of insider/outsider'.<sup>8</sup> But it is a subject positioning that has lent an extraordinary potency to his perception of the nature and power of representation.

### The mind of winter

It was after the publication of the trilogy – *Orientalism*, *The Question of Palestine* and *Covering Islam* – that Said began to put his mind to the question that was to occupy so much of his thinking. In 'The Mind of Winter: Reflections on a Life in Exile' (1984) Said captures the fate of the exile, with Wallace Stevens' resonant phrase 'the mind of winter' evoking the sense of decentring, dislocation and displacement which make exile so fascinating.

'Exile (...) is "a mind of winter" in which the pathos of summer and autumn as much as the potential of spring are nearby but unobtainable. Perhaps this is another way of saying that a life of exile moves according to a different calendar, and is less seasonal and settled than life at home. Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew.'

Exile is not necessarily the total separation from a place of origin but is rather a life in an interstitial space, where one never abandons the old but

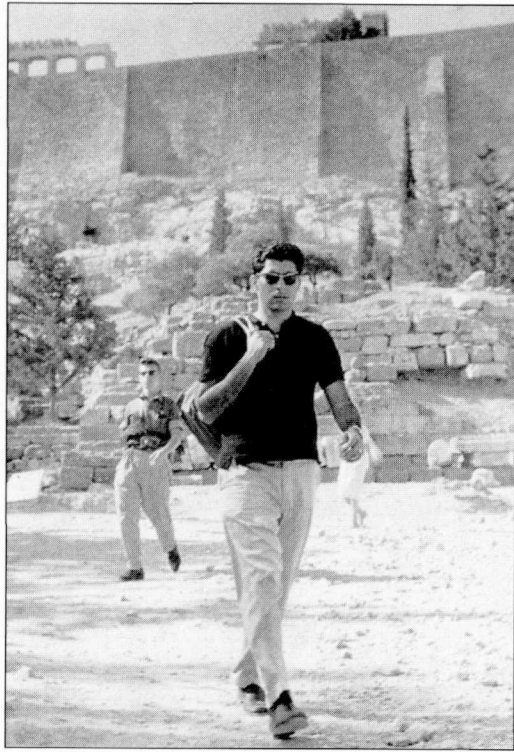
6 Abdul JanMohamed, 'Worldliness-without-world, homeless-as-home: toward a definition of the specular border intellectual' in: Michael Sprinker ed., *Edward Said: a critical reader* (Oxford 1992) 96-120, aldaar 97.

7 JanMohamed, 'Worldliness-without-world', 97.

8 Shohat, 'Antinomies of exile', 122.

neither completely accepts the new. It is not a state in which one can become complacent, comfortable and secure. Rather, it is a state that hones one's skills for survival. 'Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with one's native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both.'<sup>9</sup>

The term he coins for this condition ten years later in *Representations of the Intellectual* is 'happy with the idea of unhappiness', one of the best examples being Jonathan Swift, who, unable to reconcile his diminished status in England, spent the rest of his life in Ireland where he



Edward Said als student van Harvard tijdens een zomertrip bij de Acropolis in 1960. Uit: Edward Said, *Out of place. A memoir* (Londen 1999) 144.

produced his most powerful works. For Said, this illustrates, 'a mind flourishing, not to say benefiting, from such productive anguish.'<sup>10</sup> However, it is Adorno for whom Said saves his greatest admiration. Adorno was the quintessential intellectual because he hated 'all systems, whether on our side or theirs, with equal distaste.'<sup>11</sup> Adorno provides the most rigorous example of the exilic temperament. Ruthlessly opposed to what he called the 'administered' world, Adorno saw all life as pressed into ready-made forms, prefabricated 'homes'. He argued that everything that one says or thinks, as well as every object one possesses, is ultimately a mere commodity. Lan-

9 Said, 'The mind of winter', 55.

10 Said, *Representations of the intellectual, the 1993 Reith lectures* (London 1994) 40.

11 Said, *Representations*, 41.



Edward Said. Uit: Imre Salusinszky, *Criticism in society* (New York en Londen 1987) 122.

guage is jargon, objects are for sale. To refuse this state of affairs is the exile's intellectual mission.<sup>12</sup>

Adorno's problem was that, according to Said (who returned to this question years later), he failed to capture the pleasures of exile, pleasures such as that element of surprise, 'of never taking anything for granted',<sup>13</sup> that may give the intellectual the critical edge. Such an intellectual can examine situations as contingent rather than inevitable, 'as the results of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human beings' rather than irreversibly natural or god-given.<sup>14</sup> It also forces

the intellectual to juxtapose ideas or experiences between the old and the new, leading to better ways of thinking about the human condition. To adopt such a position one need not be an actual exile but it requires one to adopt the perspective of the outsider, to think on the margins. Exile, then, is a state to aspire to, to imagine, to be daring and to be on the move.

In *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994) Said extends his concern with exile to include the largely unaccommodated exiles, like the Palestinians and the diasporic West Indian communities, 'whose presence complicates the presumed homogeneity of the new societies in which they live.'<sup>15</sup> While exile

12 Said, 'The mind of winter', 54.

13 Said, *Representations*, 44.

14 Ibidem, 45.

15 Ibidem, 36.

may seem to be an exalted status in the West, it is also, in the late twentieth century, 'a cruel punishment of whole communities and peoples, often the inadvertent 'Intellectual exiles: expatriate and marginal' in *Representations of the intellectual* Said focuses result of impersonal forces such as war, famine and disease.'<sup>16</sup> In the essay 'on the exilic intellectual who is unwilling to make adjustments and remains an outsider, 'unaccommodated, un-coopted and resistant.'<sup>17</sup> Hence, not only is exile an *actual* condition but also a *metaphoric* condition, a state of 'restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others.'<sup>18</sup> The exilic temperament becomes a key to the disruptive and questioning stance of the intellectual: 'You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation.'<sup>19</sup>

## Worldliness and exile

The condition of exile underlies the most important feature of Edward Said's criticism – the emphasis on worldliness. The tension between personal desolation and cultural empowerment is the tension of exile in Said's own work, a tension that helps explain his own deep investment in the link between the text and the world. For that very worldliness is the guarantee of the invalidity of the text's *ownership* by nation or community or religion, however powerful those filiative connections might be.

Worldliness is not simply a view of the text and the critic, as his book *The world, the text and the critic* implies, it is the ground upon which all his cultural analysis and theory has proceeded. Whether talking about orientalists, canonical writers or the major figures of post-colonial resistance, his approach is informed by a deep and unshakeable conviction of the locatedness of intellectual activity. Whether in literary criticism or social activism the worldliness of the critic determines his or her real relations to power. Clearly the enforced loosening of ties of home and community has led to a loosening of various forms of inherited structure and boundaries. The exilic intellectual is one in which the concept of 'presence' – which is part of Said's concept of worldliness – is paramount.

16 Ibidem, 35.

17 Ibidem, 39.

18 Ibidem.

19 Ibidem.



All writing, indeed all cultural production, issues forth from a particular world and it is only by dispensing with the received dogmas and inherited boundaries of critical approaches that the critic can fully apprehend this worldliness. Intellectuals themselves, like the texts they produce, are not theoretical machines, but constantly inflected with the complexity of their own being in the world. It is this worldliness that gives intellectual work its seriousness, which makes it 'matter'. In this sense, then, worldliness remains the source of that energy which drives Edward Said's own intellectual engagements with culture and politics. It is the dis-articulation of the exiled intellectual which provides the strongest motivation to 'speak truth to power.'

The critic's function is both enhanced and focussed by his or her capacity to be 'in the world.' But what does 'world' mean? Perhaps the best conception of the critic's worldliness can be found in a passage from a twelfth century Saxon monk called Hugo of St. Victor which Said uses more than once:

'The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.'<sup>20</sup>

Such an attitude not only makes possible originality of vision, but also (since exiles are aware of at least two cultures) a *plurality* of vision.<sup>21</sup> 'Because the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation.'<sup>22</sup>

Exile can also be a condition of profound creative empowerment. Eric Auerbach, a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany, wrote his monumental study of Western criticism, *Mimesis*, in Istanbul where the very lack of access to all the books that he might have looked up enabled him to write a study of such magisterial scope. *Mimesis* itself is not, says Said, 'only a massive reaffirmation of the Western cultural tradition, but also a work built upon a critically important alienation from it.'<sup>23</sup> The intellectual not only benefits, but in some sense *needs* to be in exile to develop the capacities for

20 Hugo van St. Victor geciteerd in: Said, 'The mind of winter', 55.

21 Said, 'The mind of winter', 55.

22 Said, *Representations*, 44.

23 Said, *The world, the text and the critic* (Cambridge 1983) 8.



free ranging criticism and a form of intellectual endeavour freed from the debilitating effects of the national and the partisan.

## Culture and exile

Cultural exile also puts into question the phenomenon of culture itself. Perhaps the deepest paradoxes emerge from the exiled intellectual's relationship to culture, because while he or she may be saturated by culture, the deep link between that culture and place locates the exile within the unsettling provisionality of a diasporic culture. The connection between culture and place does not mean simply connection to a nation or region, but includes

'all the nuances or reassurance, fitness, belonging, association, and community, entailed in the phrase *at home* or *in place*(...) It is in culture that we can seek out the range of meanings and ideas conveyed by the phrases *belonging to* or *in* a place, being *at home in a place*.'<sup>24</sup>

This places the exile in a singular position with regard to history and society, but also a much more anxious and ambivalent position with regard to culture:

'But there is an even more interesting dimension to the idea of culture which Said describes as 'possessing possession. And that is the power of culture by virtue of its elevated or superior position to authorise, to dominate, to legitimate, demote, interdict and validate.'<sup>25</sup>

Culture is 'a system of values *saturating* downwards almost everything within its purview; yet paradoxically culture dominates from above without at the same time being available to everyone and everything it dominates.'<sup>26</sup>

Much of the ambivalent and contradictory nature of Said's view of the interrelation of exile, intellectual and culture, perhaps can be explained by the fact that for him exile is both an actual and a metaphorical condition:

'The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives (...)

24 Said, *The world*, 8.

25 Ibidem, 9.

26 Ibidem.

Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and, alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one in your new home or situation.<sup>27</sup>

One can detect a certain slippage even here between the actual and the metaphorical which suggests that for Said exile is also an act of will (a direction of the 'gaze') that the intellectual performs in order to stand outside the comfortable receptivity of home or nation. This rescues the concept of exile from the despairing condition of loss, to link it to an act of will, or way of being that revitalizes the critical process.

The exile of the specular border intellectual is a removal to a strangely dislocated cultural space. Said took his intellectual and professional *inspiration* from influential European intellectuals such as Swift and Auerbach who produced monumental works out of their exile, and Adorno, who rejected all inherited systems of thought and cultural affiliation. But Said's *experience* is at one with the deep pain of loss felt by diasporic peoples everywhere, a loss that makes the whole world a foreign land. While this may be a powerful stimulus to critical thought it will never overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. Said's conviction is that exile generates creativity; his experience is that cultural exile resides in the person as a permanent sense of loss, a 'mind of winter'. But Said's own life mirrors the trajectory of an increasingly globalised world. We must now comprehend a world of constant movement and exile, where the notion of 'belonging' is constantly in question, and where diaspora is a given feature of the flow of globalisation rather than an oddity. Whether it generates more stringent criticism in intellectual life, there is no doubt that cultural 'exile' has come to define the world in which we live and for that reason has moved beyond the tragedy of loss and exclusion.

27 Said, *Representations*, 39.