For Edward Said

Stuart Hall

This appreciation of Edward Said, the distinguished literary scholar, cultural critic and courageous advocate for the cause of the Palestinian people, was first given at the opening of the Oxford staging of the IniVA exhibition The Veil.[1] *The exhibition was dedicated to Said, who died in November 2003 at the age of 67, after a twelve year struggle with leukaemia.*

Edward Said was born in Jerusalem in 1935. His father was a Palestinian Christian who emigrated to the US in 1911, became an American citizen and fought with the US army in France in the First World War. The family moved to Cairo, where Wadie Said established a successful business, and Edward - who was named after the Prince of Wales - was sent to Victoria College, an English language public-school-style institution, the 'Eton of the Middle East'. He had a classic middle-class colonial childhood. His father was stern, over-bearing and distant. His mother, the daughter of a Baptist missionary from Nazareth, adored Edward - and the feeling was mutual. Nevertheless, she was a somewhat manipulative, and emotionally baffling, figure, who left him feeling that her expectations of him always went unfulfilled. Though manifestly clever, he found it hard to fit in, was rarely

1. *The Veil*, an exhibition mounted by InIVA (The Institute of International Visual Arts), featured contemporary artists who deploy the motif of 'veiling' and 'the veil' in their work. It opened at the Walsall Gallery and showed at Modern Art Oxford, before going on tour. The catalogue publication, *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, is available from institute@iniva.org.

praised, and was often identified as a troublesome boy, requiring discipline; he quickly came to experience himself - as he later put it in the title of his moving memoir of his childhood - permanently '*Out Of Place*'. He said later that the tensions in his family induced a split between his outer self, and the 'loose, irresponsible, fantasy-ridden metamorphoses of my private inner life'. The family was comfortably off, however, and lived and travelled in style. Edward was sent to the US to Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts, where the earlier pattern was repeated - blossoming academically, but - again - never quite fitting in. He was trained at the Princeton and Harvard graduate schools in the European tradition of Comparative Literature and began teaching at Columbia in 1963, an institution which he never left.

The Six Days War of 1967 was the watershed experience of his life, transforming the scholar and critic into a person with deep, abiding and unshakeable political convictions. Thereafter, he became publicly identified with the cause of the Palestinian people. Increasingly controversial, and libellously attacked, he fought a relentless struggle - in books like *The Question of Palestine* and *Covering Islam,* and in a stream of articles and essays - against the way the plight of the Palestinians was misrepresented, especially in the American media and by the right-wing pro-Israel lobby in the US. His book, *After The Last Sky,* with the photographs of Jean Moir, eloquently evoked the refugee life of ordinary Palestinians expelled from their homeland.

Edward served as an independent member of the Palestinian National Council, was an early supporter of the two-state solution, and always - and consistently - was committed to the larger hope of a possible future in which Palestinian and Jew could live peacefully together. He devoted much of his life and writing to this wider purpose, which however never led him to qualify his advocacy of the rightfulness of the Palestinians' basic claims to rights of settlement in a home of their own. He helped draft President Arafat's address to the General Assembly of the UN in 1984. He came to regard the Oslo Agreements as little short of 'a Palestinian Versailles'. However, he became openly and progressively critical of the Arafat leadership, of its authoritarian features and its widespread corruption, regarding it as having failed to offer its people a principled or democratic leadership. He was accordingly shunned in

Arafat's inner circles, where he was - ironically - advised to 'go back to literature'. Said's early work, in books like *Beginnings* and *The World, The Text and the Critic*, developed a distinctive critical methodology. He was a brilliantly gifted and incisive critic. His breadth of interest was remarkably wide, and he brought this to bear in a consistently insightful way on writers and texts. His engagement with the literary and cultural life of his times - registered in his many critical commentaries and reviews on major texts, thinkers, and ideas - was impressive, in an age in which criticism has largely lost its bearings in a wider intellectual and political world. He was committed to the secular, 'worldly' intellectual life as a vocation. Literature, culture and politics fused at an early stage of his intellectual development, and his finest work was created out of that rich matrix.

It has been argued that Said's strong sense of his own marginal and exilic status enabled him to adopt a kind of 'double-consciousness' in his readings of works in the great western literary canon. Thus his study *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* was keenly alive to Conrad's complicated and ambivalent position as chronicler *and* critic of Empire. He was able to appreciate the ways in which the canon's great achievements - Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* or Conrad's *Heart of Darkness,* Forster's *Passage to India* or Kipling's *Kim* - were *both* profoundly embedded in their own historicity and shaped by their moment and culture, *and*, at the same time, remarkable achievements of human awareness, depth of insight and complexity. He never fell into a crude and simplistic either/or, for or against: 'not masterpieces that have to be venerated, but … works that have to be grasped in their historical density so that they can resonate'.

His most influential and innovative work was undoubtedly *Orientalism*, published in 1978. This book single-handedly created, and remains amongst the foremost texts of, what is now called 'post-colonial studies'. Based on an astonishing breadth of reading in English and French, this book demonstrated how 'Orientalist' scholarship and discourse had constructed and produced 'the Orient', in the two centuries following Napoleon's conquest of Egypt, as both an object of knowledge and a site for the exercise of power. This work demonstrated how the systematic mis-representations which he had uncovered in the regular western media reporting on the Middle East were in fact 'part of a much larger system of thought that was endemic to the West's whole enterprise of dealing with

the Arab world'. His working-through of this insight has proved to be one of the most illuminating and compelling modern critical insights. It is still very widely drawn on, having changed the fundamental paradigm of thought about the imperial imagination - often by critics who, while standing on the back of this hard-won perception, cannot bring themselves to name its source. In answer to the criticism that this presented too binary a picture, his second instalment of the argument - *Culture and Imperialism*, published in 1993 - bent the twig in the opposite direction, stressing, through a remarkable series of studies of major political intellectuals of the de-colonising world such as C.L.R. James and Frantz Fanon, how inseparably inter-twined were the fates and fortunes of margin and metropole, coloniser and colonised, in the history of Empire and its aftermath.

In the last years and months of his life, he wrote more, more urgently and on a wider range of topics than ever before. He brought together selections of his essays and reviews in collections like *Reflections On Exile*, and of his political journalism in *The End of The Peace Process*. He also published his wonderful lecture *Freud and the Non-Europeans*, which not only sympathetically explores Freud's complicated identification with 'Jewishness' but also - through its interrogation of Freud's text *Moses and Monotheism*, on the origins of mono-theism in Christianity, Judaism and Islam, and its exploration of the Egyptian background to Moses - symbolically opens a pathway to the possible common ground between the so intimately connected, yet so hostile and opposed, 'worlds' of Arab and Jew. In his joint work with his friend Daniel Barenboim in establishing the West-Eastern Divan orchestra, and his writings on Wagner and other composers in *Musical Elaborations,* he returned to his deep love for and involvement with music - he was an accomplished pianist of near-professional standard - deploying it as an instrument of international understanding and collaboration.

A wonderfully warm and open friend and colleague, a critic of fierce integrity and sound judgement, a figure committed to the vocation of critical public intellectual, a commanding political intellectual and a person of passionate and courageous political commitment, his loss is devastating in both public and personal terms. Our common lives have been deeply enriched and inspired by his life and work. The gap he leaves behind is immeasurable. We shall be lucky to see his like again.