

Being Grateful to Edward Said

NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS

Edward Said's gifts to us were many, but I will speak here of only two, deeply important to me. The first gift was the message of his *Orientalism*. He asked there how scholars have studied and interpreted peoples different from their own in a context of conflict in power and belief, of imperialism and colonialism. I first met Edward Said in 1976, when he was a fellow at Stanford's Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences and working on that book. He came to see me at the University of California at Berkeley, where I was then teaching. I was very taken with this fine looking man, with his bright and lively eyes. He asked, "What did sixteenth-century travel literature have to say about Islam and the Arabs?" In an unforgettable conversation, we talked of Guillaume Postel and other Renaissance visitors to the Levant.

The resulting book, as we all know, was pathbreaking. *Orientalism* set the agenda for all subsequent work on colonial peoples and intercultural studies. This was true whether or not one agreed with his argument. In 1990-1992, when the Shelby Cullom Davis Center at Princeton had theme years on "Imperialism, Colonialism, and the Colonial Aftermath," every application of the hundreds we received began with the work of Edward Said.

His picture was never black and white. If the Orientalist scholars had created a stereotyped image of Arabs and Islam as unchanging, passive, and emotional in contrast to the vigorous, rational West, still they had amassed an enormous amount of material. Edward spoke of the "heroic effort," the "awesome labors" of Silvestre de Sacy in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, teaching Arabic grammar, editing many texts in Arabic, translating texts into French, writing on weights, measures, coins. If Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* had running through it the British sugar plantations in Antigua, Edward still said it was a marvelous novel. If *Orientalism* had been perpetuated in the West, through its connections with scholarly institutions and to the interest of imperial advance (from Napoleon's occupation of Egypt to contemporary American penetration into the Middle East), still there was some acquiescence to these views in the Arab world itself: "the modern Orient . . . participates in its own Orientalizing." Similarly, he did not cast all Western scholars as narrow Orientalists,

caught in their preconceptions, but noted the responsiveness of, say, Clifford Geertz and Jacques Berque to the concrete detail of the societies they studied.

To me, the most enduring value of *Orientalism* and the later *Culture and Imperialism* is not the special cases explored, but the large question of how one represents other cultures. Indeed, he asks already in 1978 whether the idea of separate and distinct cultures is even a good one. Does it set us down the wrong path, beset by false dichotomies, at the very start? "Is the notion of a distinct culture (or race, or religion, or civilization) a useful one," he asked, "or does it always get invoked either in self-congratulation . . . or hostility and aggression?"

Edward Said's second gift to us is his model of the intellectual, as shown in his Reith Lectures of 1993 and his beautifully written, frank, and humorously self-reflective autobiography, *Out of Place*. There he portrays the exile or marginal person as possessing the independence to be central to the intellectual life and criticism of our time. He shows that he *chose* his own identity out of the mixture of Palestinian, Egyptian, Lebanese, and American lives entangled in his past. It was a choice made because he wanted to identify with the sufferings of the Palestinians uprooted from their homes or slain. It was a choice that never dulled his independence or honesty, as he lashed out at disastrous actions of P.L.O. leaders or the inhumanity of suicide bombers. It was a choice that never limited his connections with peoples from many worlds or lessened his sorrow at the sufferings of the European Jews during Nazi times.

I was one of the Jewish friends of Edward Said. We were many, from the Jewish piano teachers of his youth to the Jewish intellectuals he admired and collaborated with. Erich Auerbach, writing his *Mimesis* in exile in Turkey, was an image that inspired him. Noam Chomsky was a model in his critical independence and devotion to both learning and human justice and peace. Daniel Barenboim, with whom Edward collaborated on a musical venture with young Israelis and young Palestinians, played with some of these musicians at his funeral.

As a Jew, deeply committed to the diaspora and to a non-Zionist way of living as a Jew in the world, Edward's example is deeply moving for me. In 2000, I sent him an essay by my daughter, Hannah Davis Ta'eb,

about an Egyptian feminist, writer, and activist, who had been much influenced by Said's work. I told him, too, about my own current writing where, using a tenth/sixteenth century Muslim traveler, I try to paint the shapes of cultural mixture, the paths by which people move between disparate worlds. As he said in the introduction to his Reith lectures, "Cultures are too intermingled, their contents and histories too interdependent and hybrid, for surgical separation into large and mostly ideological oppositions." He took the time to answer, speaking affectionately of Hannah's subject, and commenting on my project. "Moving between worlds is, I sometimes think, *the* great theme of our time."

Every gift creates an obligation. It is hard for us to go on without Edward's voice speaking frankly about events, to miss the articles that would appear despite his illness and that we would rush to read after every latest political horror. But we are now obliged to carry on his ethical and political mission in the broadest sense: a mission committed to universal standards of justice, to empathy with suffering among those close to us and those far away, to honest and independent expression, and to hope—hope, no matter how grim the prospects, for people of good will and reason and for a peaceful world.