

The objective character of artistic cognition

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Edward Said, a Palestinian and a professor of literature at Columbia University in New York City, has set himself the task in *Culture and Imperialism* of offering “a history of the imperial adventure rendered in cultural terms.”

Said, a bourgeois nationalist opponent of Zionism, is perhaps best known for his work *Orientalism*, published in 1978. That book examined the ways in which European intellectual thought, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in particular, had created certain images of the “Orient”—as mysterious, unchanging and ultimately inferior—in order to justify colonial rule. The book, animated by a hostility to imperialism, was not without interest. Said himself demonstrated personal courage in coming to the defense of the Palestinians in opposition to the propaganda machine of American imperialism.

Fifteen years have passed. Said, who continues to be identified with the Palestine Liberation Organization, is well-ensconced in academic life in this country. What does his new book have to offer?

In the elusive language of the “postmodern” critic, Said does not set out to prove anything in *Culture and Imperialism*. He seeks to counterpose, explore and play with texts. The clash of material interests are dissolved, in Said’s vocabulary, into “discrepant experiences” which he is attempting to reconcile. “In juxtaposing experiences with each other,” he writes in a typical passage, “in letting them play off each other, it is my political aim ... to make concurrent those views and experiences that are ideologically and culturally closed to each other and that attempt to distance or suppress other views and experiences.”

The “experiences” he is “juxtaposing” are in general literary or historic texts, both from the metropolitan and colonial countries. These include Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations*; Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*; Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*; Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*; Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida*; Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*; the poetry of W. B. Yeats and Aime Cesaire; Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*; the writings of Amilcar Cabral; C.L.R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* and George Antonius’s *The Arab Awakening*.

Politically, Said comes forward as an admirer of figures such as Fanon and Cabral and an advocate of a kind of radical, cosmopolitan nationalism, precisely at the historical moment when penitent bourgeois national leaders of all stripes are arriving in Washington with great regularity.

The author seems in large measure to be motivated by the desire that “anti-imperialist” literary criticism take its rightful place in the academic/cultural sun, alongside feminist and other radical critiques. He remarks a little plaintively: “If with feminists, with great cultural critics sensitive to history and class like [Raymond] Williams, with cultural and stylistic interpreters, we have been sensitized to the issues their interests raise, we should now proceed to regard the geographical division of the world ... as not neutral ... but as politically charged, beseeching the attention and elucidation its considerable proportions require.”

Said’s aim, he maintains, is to “consider the ways in which a reconsidered or revised notion” of a “postimperial intellectual attitude” might “expand the overlapping community between metropolitan and formerly colonized societies.” He wants to “formulate an alternative both

to a politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility.”

It is critical to note that Said’s efforts are not directed, in any sense, toward the remaking of society. His aim is to reshape attitudes and perceptions. In essence, Said is issuing an appeal to Western intellectuals to abandon their support for colonial adventures, “to take seriously the alternatives to imperialism,” and, not insignificantly, to grant recognition and status to the work of intellectuals, like himself, who hail from the colonial or semicolonial world.

From the cultural and critical point of view, Said’s fundamental purpose, once the veil of postmodernist verbiage has been pierced, is to indict modern literature, particularly the British novel in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for having prepared, accompanied and validated “the practice of imperialism.”

Said devotes a great many pages to proving what are, in many cases, essentially truisms. To whom will it come as a revelation that the works of Austen, Dickens, Conrad and Kipling were unthinkable outside of the development of British and world capitalism? The question is not whether each of the above-mentioned authors was inseparably linked to a particular historical period and social class, but whether that was all, or essentially all, he or she was?

To this question, despite his many equivocations, Said responds, like the entire international coterie of postmodernist critics—yes. Marxism, although this might strike the superficial thinker as paradoxical, responds—absolutely not. This is the essential issue that this review will consider.

Said’s own attitude to Marx and Marxism is of some significance. In essence, he opposes revolutionary socialist theory and practice, while making clear his conversance with various individuals and trends, particularly those which have had an impact on literary or cultural studies and have passed themselves off as Marxist over the past decades: the Hungarian Stalinist Georg Lukacs, the Frankfurt School of academic pseudo-Marxists and the adherents of French Stalinist Louis Althusser. He writes at one point of the “universalizing techniques of deconstruction, structuralism, and Lukacsian and Althusserian Marxism.”

Even more significantly, in the course of his analysis of Fanon, Said describes Lukacs’s rejection—in *History and Class Consciousness*—of the dialectics of nature (his advocacy of “the separation of subjective consciousness from the world of objects”) as an “extremely audacious thesis” and “oppositional even within oppositional Marxism.” There is a link between this endorsement of Lukacs’s position and Said’s subjectivism in approaching the phenomenon of imperialism, as well as questions of culture, both of which we will consider below.

When Said approaches the great figures of Marx and Engels, he is much less respectful. In fact, he resorts to slanders and distortions. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he again raises the claim, first made in *Orientalism*, that the founders of the socialist workers movement were indifferent to the sufferings of colonial peoples and cheerleaders for imperialist intervention in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. He writes, for example, that Marx and Engels “were no less capable than French and British governmental spokesmen” of propagating European myths about colonial subjects and

that they “spun out their theories of Oriental and African ignorance and superstition.” He writes: “When on September 17, 1857, Engels spoke of the Moors of Algeria as a ‘timid race’ because they were repressed but ‘reserving nevertheless their cruelty and vindictiveness while in moral character they stand very low,’ he was merely echoing French colonial doctrine.”

That this passes without comment either from reviewers or “left” admirers of Said is testimony to the prevailing political climate. The phrases which Said cites come from a piece entitled *Algeria*, which Engels wrote for the New American Cyclopedias. Let us quote a further passage, uncited by Said, which gives a far clearer picture of Engels’s essential argument: “From the first occupation of Algeria by the French to the present time, the unhappy country has been the arena of unceasing bloodshed, rapine, and violence. Each town, large and small, has been conquered in detail at an immense sacrifice of life. The Arab and Kabyle tribes, to whom independence is precious, and hatred of foreign domination a principle dearer than life itself, have been crushed and broken by the terrible razzias in which dwellings and property are burnt and destroyed, standing crops cut down, and the miserable wretches who remain massacred, or subjected to all the horrors of lust and brutality.”

But it is not simply a matter of establishing that Marx and Engels denounced the crimes of French and British imperialism in the colonial countries, which they did at every opportunity. Their standpoint was completely at odds with the moralizing of Said, a member of that fraternity which views 1492 as the beginning of a long descent into the horrors of modern civilization. The founders of scientific socialism grasped that capitalism had a “double mission” in the colonial countries, “one destructive, the other regenerating,” as Marx wrote in 1853. He explained that the English bourgeoisie in India was forced to annihilate the “old Asiatic society,” but that this would not liberate the mass of the population, only the “appropriation by the people” of the “productive powers” would do that.

Marx continued: “Has the bourgeoisie ever done more? Has it ever effected a progress without dragging individuals and peoples through blood and dirt, through misery and degradation?” It is this contradictory role of capitalism, creating through “blood and dirt” a world economy that the working class must seize hold of and reorganize on a rational basis, that Said does not come close to grasping.

The most striking feature of Said’s definition of imperialism, as we indicated above, is its subjective and ahistorical character. He views it as “thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others.” Imperialist practice is the emanation of a state of mind. Why certain people “think about ... land ... that is lived on and owned by others” at a given moment in history and not at another, or why some people think about such land and others do not—all this remains a mystery.

In any event, Said’s definition, far from explaining the phenomenon of modern-day imperialism as a specific stage of capitalist development, could be equally well applied to the colonizing efforts of the Roman Empire, the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century or the Spanish settlements in the New World in the wake of Columbus’s voyage.

Starting from the view that imperialism is a “struggle over geography,” Said explains, “That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons but also about ideas, about forms, about images and imaginings.” He repeats the same conception numerous times, only formulating it slightly differently in each case. For example: “Both [imperialism and colonialism] are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination....,” or, “For the enterprise of empire depends upon the idea of having an empire ... and all kinds of preparations are made for it within a culture....”

Enter the artists, in Said’s scheme of things. He writes: “the literature

itself makes constant references to itself as somehow participating in Europe’s overseas expansion, and therefore creates what Williams calls ‘structures of feeling’ that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire.” And further: “In British culture, for instance, one may discover a consistency of concern in Spenser, Shakespeare, Defoe, and Austen that fixes socially desirable, empowered space in metropolitan England or Europe and connects it by design, motive, and development to distant or peripheral worlds ... conceived of as desirable but subordinate.”

In other words, the literary artists provided intellectual, moral and emotional justification and/or accompaniment for imperialism and the enslavement of the colonial peoples.

Thus, *Heart of Darkness* “is extraordinarily caught up, is indeed an organic part of, the ‘scramble for Africa’ that was contemporary with Conrad’s composition.... To represent Africa is to enter the battle over Africa, inevitably connected to later resistance, decolonization, and so forth.”

In considering Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park* (1814), Said cautions the reader that he is not suggesting that “Wordsworth, Austen, or Coleridge, because they wrote *before* 1857, actually caused the establishment of formal British governmental rule over India *after* 1857.” They did, however, propagate “positive ideas of home, of a nation and its language, of proper order, good behavior, moral values ... [which] tend to devalue other worlds and, perhaps more significantly from a retrospective point of view, they do not prevent or inhibit or give resistance to horrendously unattractive imperialist practices.”

Austen’s novel, in Said’s view, is “part of the structure of an expanding imperialist venture ... [which] steadily, if unobtrusively, opens up a broad expanse of domestic imperialist culture without which Britain’s subsequent acquisition of territory would not have been possible.”

When he turns to *Kim*, Said writes, “Kipling’s choice of the novel form and of his character Kim O’Hara to engage profoundly with an India that he loved but could not properly have—this is what we should keep resolutely as the book’s central meaning. Then we can read *Kim* as a great document of its historical moment and, too, an aesthetic milestone along the way to midnight August 14-15, 1947 [the date of India’s independence]....”

First of all, Said mixes up artists and epochs in a ludicrous and genuinely irresponsible fashion. Imperialism arose as the result of economic developments in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The relatively free competition of the previous period gave way to an enormous concentration of production in the hands of giant corporations and trusts. The need to carve out new and protect old markets produced an explosive development of colonialism. To suggest, for instance, that Austen—who lived in an era when the British Empire of 1890 was not only unimaginable, but even, to many of her social class, undesirable—was intellectually setting the stage for such a development, is simply an absurdity.

This is the result, in the first place, of Said’s ahistorical approach. But it is also the inevitable product of a method which places Austen, Kipling, Conrad and Camus on a single plane *on the basis of their attitude toward colonies and colonialism*, essentially ignoring what divides them, their differing capacities as artists. It is as if one were to write a history of scientific thought and then contrast the views of Galileo, Newton and Einstein, not on the structure of the physical world, but on monotheism.

The question that always has to be asked is: does the artist, in his or her work, fight for truth and reality (psychological, moral, social), *despite* the limitations of class and world outlook?

In this reviewer’s opinion, Conrad and Camus are retrograde figures, not because of their social views primarily, but due to their severe artistic limitations. In their cases, there *is* a certain identity between their artistic and social approaches: a superficiality and a coldness, a contempt for human beings, which certainly facilitated or reinforced their abilities to

become spokesmen for colonial rule, in central Africa, in the one case, in Algeria, in the other.

The example of Kipling is instructive in a different fashion. Clearly, this was a man with a repugnant social outlook, an open and unashamed proponent of imperialism and the infamous “white man’s burden.” Nonetheless, Kipling was an extraordinary storyteller, with a genuine sensitivity, as long as it did not interfere with the fundamental “civilizing” role of the British in India, to various kinds of trauma and pain. His work was admired by Henry James, Ezra Pound and Bertolt Brecht, among others. Many of his stories about the lives of British civilians, soldiers and soldiers’ wives are quite desolate and far from mere propaganda in the interests of the Empire. As well, his moving accounts of children and young people confronted with repressive authority, which flowed from his own early experiences, give many of his works an unsettling, subversive quality which does not neatly jibe with the view of Kipling as an uncritical upholder of the status quo.

Said’s chapter on *Kim* is one of the more interesting in the book, but in the final analysis, he reduces Kipling’s work simply to a kind of ambiguous way station on the road to Indian independence and the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, which, by the way, he presents totally uncritically.

But this is of a piece with his general approach. Said conceives of European bourgeois literature as primarily an agent of social control, a tool of the ruling powers, an opiate, a justifier of abominable practices, almost a punishment meted out to society. He speaks about “the novel’s consolidation of authority” which “is not simply connected to the functioning of social power and governance, but made to appear normative and sovereign....” He comments: “Some of the most exciting recent criticism—Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* and David Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*—shows the novel generally, and narrative in particular, to have *a sort of regulatory social presence* in West European societies.” (Reviewer’s emphasis.)

The deep distrust of toward literature that pervades Said’s work and the work of his co-thinkers is remarkable. What is its source?

It might be useful to begin with a consideration of what “culture” is. Said provides a two-part definition. In the first place, he suggests that culture is “all those practices ... that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principle aims is pleasure.” This effectively tells us what culture is *not*.

“Second ... culture is a concept,” he writes, “that includes a refining and elevating element, each society’s reservoir of the best that has been known and thought, as Matthew Arnold put it in the 1860s.... You read Dante or Shakespeare in order to keep up with the best that was thought and known, and also to see yourself, your people, society, and tradition in their best lights.... In this second sense culture is a sort of theater where various political and ideological causes engage one another....”

In contrast to this vision, which accepts entirely the bourgeoisie’s own identification of culture with nation and ignores entirely its objective, historical roots, Marxism takes a different view. Leon Trotsky, in his *Culture and Socialism*, defines culture as “everything that has been created, built, learnt, conquered by man in the course of his entire history, in distinction from what nature has given....”

Trotsky points to the contradiction that is at the heart of the problem. He writes, “We will then consider it as firmly established that culture has grown out of man’s struggle with nature for existence, for the improvement of his conditions of life, for the enlargement of his power. But out of this same basis classes also have grown.... This means that historical culture has possessed a class character.... But does this mean that we are against all the culture of the past?

“There exists, in fact, a profound contradiction here. Everything that has been conquered, created, built by man’s efforts and which serves to

enhance man’s power is culture. But since it is not a matter of individual man but of social man ... culture is found to be the basic instrument of class oppression....”

And yet, Trotsky points out, we tell the working class to master this culture. How is this possible? He notes that many have stumbled over this contradiction, forgetting that fundamentally class society is the organization of production.

“What,” Trotsky continues, “is the basis of bases—the class organization of society or its productive forces? Without doubt the productive forces.... In the productive forces is expressed the materialized economic skill of mankind, his historical ability to ensure his existence....”

So he asks, regarding technique, “is it only an instrument of class oppression? It is enough to put such a question for it to be answered at once: no, technique is the fundamental conquest of mankind; although it has served, up to the present, as an instrument of exploitation, yet it is at the same time the fundamental condition for the emancipation of the exploited. The machine strangles the wage-slave in its grip. But he can free himself only through the machine. Therein is the root of the entire question.”

The crux of the matter is that artistic culture forms an essential element of the accumulated effort by human beings to struggle with nature, to improve their conditions of life, to enlarge their powers. Its accomplishments are objective; they are not simply identical with the social standing or class outlook of the artist. Art, like science, involves the penetration by human beings of the hitherto unknown in the external world.

Art and science function differently, and this can be a source of confusion. In the artist’s field of operations, he or she takes in social life, so his or her ideological prejudices are much more obviously exposed. Art does not operate with laws and equations, but with images. The question is the objective content of those images.

The greatest representatives of bourgeois thought, as well as the entire current of classical Marxists, were always very clear on that issue, in opposition to the spiritual descendants of Immanuel Kant.

G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), in his writings on aesthetics, stressed the “universal and absolute need out of which art ... arises.” He wrote: “But the productive imagination of the artist is the imagination of a great mind and heart, the apprehension and creation of ideas and of shapes, and, indeed, *the exhibition of the profoundest and most universal human interests in the definite sensuous mold of pictorial representation.*” (Reviewer’s emphasis.)

Even more categorically, Hegel explained that “it is necessary to maintain that *art has the vocation of revealing the truth in the form of sensuous artistic shape* ... and, therefore, has its purpose in itself, in this representation and revelation. For other objects, such as instruction, purification, improvement, pecuniary gain, endeavor after fame and honor, have nothing to do with the work of art as such and do not determine its conception.”

V.G. Belinsky (1811-1848), the great Russian thinker and critic, in his work *The Idea of Art* (1841), under the obvious influence of Hegel, wrote: “Art is the immediate contemplation of life, thinking in images.” Belinsky uses the evocative phrase “art thinking” in his writings on aesthetics.

Trotsky absorbed this tradition, through the work of such figures as G.V. Plekhanov and Antonio Labriola, and advanced it, providing the most specific and profound answers from a Marxist point of view to quite complex questions of the relations between art and social life.

The well-known discussion between Trotsky and the emerging Stalinist cultural spokesmen in 1924, contained in the pamphlet *Class and Art*, centers precisely on the issue of whether art is reducible to the class outlook of the artist under consideration.

In the course of the discussion, Trotsky responded to Feodor Raskolnikov, who had advanced the view that Bolshevik political writing

had to be supplemented by artistic work in which the Communist world outlook was presented. Trotsky commented: “*In works of art he, [Raskolnikov] ignores that which makes them works of art.* This was most vividly shown in his remarkable judgment on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, which in his opinion is valuable to us just because it enables us to understand the psychology of a certain class at a certain time. To put the matter that way means simply to strike out the *Divine Comedy* from the realm of art.” (Reviewer’s emphasis.)

Trotsky points out that transforming literary works into mere “historical documents”—à la Said and countless others—destroys the “fundamental relationship” between the author and the reader. He asks, how is it possible that there should be “a directly aesthetic relationship between us and a medieval Italian book? This is explained by the fact that in class society, in spite of all its changeability, there are certain common features....” Trotsky gives as an example such “an elementary psychological feeling as fear of death.”

As he did in *Culture and Socialism*, Trotsky poses the question: how is it possible that we should encourage workers to master the products of past culture, in this case the writings of Aleksandr Pushkin, the great Russian poet? “Shall we say to the worker: read Pushkin in order to understand how a nobleman, a serf-owner and gentleman of the bedchamber, encountered spring and experienced autumn? This element is, of course, present in Pushkin, for Pushkin grew up on a particular social basis. But the expression that Pushkin gave his feelings is so saturated with the artistic, and generally with the psychological, experience of centuries, is so crystallized, that it has lasted down to our times....”

The approach of the great Marxists to individual artists, and, in particular, Trotsky’s approach to Dante and Pushkin, is diametrically opposed to Said’s method in regard to writers such as Jane Austen. Austen (1775-1817) was the daughter of a Tory parson and expressed the interests and outlook of the landed aristocracy.

In her novel, *Mansfield Park*, she takes it for granted that the well-being of the novel’s central figures depend on the income extracted from sugar plantations in the West Indies, on which slavery prevailed.

Despite being couched in elaborate and obfuscating language, Said’s argumentation is of the most vulgar, ahistorical and, frankly, psychologically insensitive character. After presenting his arguments regarding the importance of the Antigua estates to the novel, he proceeds to scold Austen: “All the evidence says that even the most routine aspects of holding slaves on a West Indian sugar plantation were cruel stuff. And everything we know about Austen and her values is at odds with the cruelty of slavery.”

So Said declares, “In order more accurately to read works like *Mansfield Park*, we have to see them in the main as resisting or avoiding that other setting....” In other words, the importance of the novel exists in what is not present, in what is suppressed.

Said is reduced to playing games at this point. He first suggests that it “would be silly to expect Jane Austen to treat slavery with anything like the passion of an abolitionist or a newly liberated slave.” However, apparently the practitioners of the “rhetoric of blame,” the cultural nationalists, attack her, “retrospectively, for being white, privileged, insensitive, complicit.” This raises the question in Said’s mind, “do we therefore jettison her novels as so many trivial exercises in aesthetic frumpery?”

Here Said poses as the urbane defender of world culture—but it is important to note the grounds on which he does so. He declares, “Not at all, I would argue, if we take seriously our intellectual and interpretative vocation to make connections, to deal with as much of the evidence as possible, fully and actually, to read what is there or not there, above all, to see complementarity and interdependence instead of isolated, venerated, or formalized experience that excludes and forbids the hybridizing

intrusions of human history.”

In other words, cutting through the doubletalk, Austen is of historical interest as a specimen of a particular social outlook and as a contrast to what appeared later in other parts of the world in the form of the “emergence of a post-colonial consciousness.”

Nobody, as Trotsky pointed out, forbids a reader from assuming the role of a researcher and approaching a piece of literature as a mere historical document, providing he or she does it conscientiously and objectively, but this is quite distinct from the aesthetic appreciation of a work of art.

Mansfield Park is an extraordinary novel in which Austen exhibits her unquestionable grasp of the “laws of motion” of emotional life. The depiction of the characters’ complex and continually changing relations is objectively true and speaks to the reader today, to borrow from Trotsky, not because Austen was a Tory parson’s daughter of the early nineteenth century “but, to a large extent, in spite of that circumstance.”

The novel presents human personality in the form of vivid and pleasurable portraits which objectively add to our own grasp of how people, in the class society which still exists, live together. But Said can only see in *Mansfield Park* the defense of “the values associated with ... ordination, law and propriety.”

Said’s views, and the views of a myriad of “left” literary and art critics, run directly counter to those of classical Marxism. He (and they) can only conceive of art as either the direct product of economic conditions (in Labriola’s words, “effluvia, ornaments, emanations and mirages of material interests”) or the result of an inexplicable and isolated spark of genius.

Typically, given Said’s propensity for qualification and equivocation, he expresses this in the form of an essentially dishonest disclaimer, denying that either of the above-mentioned views is his: “But for all their social presence, novels are not reducible to a sociological current and cannot be done justice to aesthetically, culturally, and politically as subsidiary forms of class, ideology, or interest. Equally, however, novels are not simply the product of lonely genius, to be regarded only as manifestations of unconditioned creativity.” (Reviewer’s emphasis.)

This raises an obvious question: if novels are not reducible to “class, ideology, or interest”—which is how Said actually treats them in most of his book—and they are not simply the manifestations of unconditioned creativity, then *what are they?* One would search in vain for a straightforward answer to this question.

In the final analysis, the radical proponents of “culture as ideology” are doing the intellectual work of the bourgeoisie. The attack on the notion that art cognizes life, the hostility to art itself, goes hand in hand today with attacks on science and technology from sections of the ecological movement, and open right-wing attacks on the intellectual conquests of the Enlightenment.

Consciously or not, Said is speaking as one who deeply fears the disruptive and potentially subversive role of art. Trotsky and André Breton were not idly chattering when they wrote in 1938, “True art, which is not content to play variations on ready-made models but rather insists on expressing the inner needs of man and of mankind in its time—*true art is unable not to be revolutionary, not to aspire to a complete and radical reconstruction of society.*”

It is from this standpoint, as the greatest proponent of the genuine artist’s truth-telling qualities—the ability to uncover all that is false and oppressive, the natural attraction to people’s highest aspirations and desires—that Marxism today needs to approach problems of aesthetics.



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