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Reading Contrapuntally Now

Abstract I: This essay focuses on the relevance of Edward Said's humanism and his practice of contrapuntal reading to recent debates on world literature and the globalisation of literary studies.

Abstract II: Questo saggio propone una discussione della rilevanza dell'umanesimo di Edward Said e della sua pratica di lettura contrappuntistica per i recenti dibattiti sulla letteratura mondiale e la globalizzazione degli studi letterari.

When three centuries ago the slaves came to the West Indies, they entered directly into the large-scale agriculture of the sugar plantation, which was a modern system. [...] The Negroes, therefore, from the very start lived a life that was in its essence a modern life (James 2001: 305-306).

The advent of aggressive subspecialities, mostly centered on the academic study of identities displaced from the worldly context into the academy – and therefore depoliticized – has had a major casualty, which is the sense of collective human history (Said 2001: 68).

It is in many ways not surprising that the late Edward Said became an admirer of the Trinidadian historian and cricket fan C. L. R. James, whose famous account of the eighteenth-century slave revolution in San Domingo, *The Black Jacobins* (1938), he had got into the habit of recommending to friends and students:

Originally published in 1938, it is a study of the great Haitian slave

insurrection that began in 1791 and was directly influenced by the ideas and actions of the French Revolution of 1789. Readers who do not know of the book react with excitement and admiration, and there is for me the special pleasure of watching people make a major discovery, as I made the same discovery some time before (Said 1989: 126).

When one reads Said's appraisal of James's epic account of the struggles waged by the black Jacobins of San Domingo, it quickly becomes apparent that the source of his admiration lies not just in James's achievements as a historian, but more broadly in James's intellectual style and demeanour. Consider, for instance, the closing paragraphs of the third chapter of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), "Resistance and Opposition", where Said singles out for praise what is arguably one of the most puzzling passages in James's book. This is the section from the 1963 appendix "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro" that juxtaposes some of the most famous lines from Aimé Césaire's poetic manifesto of the *négritude* movement, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1938), with verses from the last stanza of T. S. Eliot's "The Dry Salvages" (1941):

but the work of man is only just beginning
and it remains to man to conquer all
the violence entrenched in the recesses of his passion.

And no race possesses the monopoly of beauty,
of intelligence, of force, and there
is a place for all at the rendezvous
of victory
(Césaire, cited in Said 1993: 339).

Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and the future

Are conquered, and reconciled,
Where action were otherwise movement
Of that which is only moved
And has in it no source of movement
(Eliot, cited in Said 1993: 339).

An exemplary instantiation of what Said would call “contrapuntal reading”, James’s juxtaposition, he writes, turns poetry “into a vehicle for crossing over from the provincialism of one strand of history into other histories, all of them animated by and actualized in ‘an impossible union’” (Said 1993: 339-340). It is a move that according to Said captures the “energies of anti-imperialist liberation” that enervate James’s work, which for him represented not so much a model as a living embodiment of the radical cosmopolitanism and practice of anti-doctrinaire intellectual militancy that he saw as constituting the most vital resources for politically engaged and creative thinking:

This movement resists the already charted and controlled narrative lanes and skirts the systems of theory, doctrine, and orthodoxy. But, as James’s whole work attests, it does not abandon the social principles of community, critical vigilance, and theoretical orientation (Said 1993: 340).

Significantly, Said’s appraisal of James’s oeuvre echoes the words he used to respond to those critics who disapproved of his *Orientalism* (1978) on account of its “residual humanism” and “theoretical inconsistencies”. In his response, what Said claims for *Orientalism* is its value as an “individual effort”, “in Gerard Manley Hopkins’s sense, *original*”, a “combination of consistency *and* inconsistency [...] which can only be rendered by preserving for oneself as writer and critic the right to some emotional force, the right to be moved, angered, surprised, and even delighted” (Said 1994: 339-340). Said’s voice, here and elsewhere, is that of “secular intellectual” who, like James, could combine a number of apparently

conflicting engagements and affiliations: a critical thinker who maintained a strong political connection with the Arab world from which he came, at the same time as he also remained faithful to his intellectual affiliation to the European intellectual tradition in which he had been schooled. Thus, as one looks back at Said's intellectual biography in light of his allegiance to the cause of Palestinian liberation and his relentless critique of the roots of Western imperialism in European culture, one cannot fail to hear the autobiographical resonances carried by his remark that:

There is no sense in [James's] work of [his] standing outside the Western cultural tradition, however much [he] articulated the adversarial experience of colonial and/or non-Western peoples. Well after *négritude*, Black nationalism, and the nativism of the 1960s and 1970s, James stubbornly supported the Western heritage at the same time that he belonged to the insurrectionary anti-imperialist moment which he shared with Fanon, Cabral, and Rodney (Said 1993: 248).

This same kind of double consciousness was in fact the source of one of the main charges laid by Aijaz Ahmad in his notoriously fierce *ad hominem* attack on Said in "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said" (Ahmad 1992: 159-220). It is a critique that bears rereading. After underscoring Said's troubled relationship with the great European tradition of comparative literary studies in which he had been trained as a scholar, and which prompted the writing of *Orientalism*, Ahmad proceeds to acknowledge that in "the field of Cultural Studies, Said is the most vivacious narrator of the history of European humanism's complicity in the history of European colonialism" (Ahmad 1992: 163). For Ahmad, however, even the latter turns out to be a dubious achievement, for it translates not only into Said's "paradoxical relationship with Western High Humanism" (Ahmad 1992: 163), but also into having gained a prominent position within a disciplinary formation that

Ahmad says is incapable of accounting for the “histories of economic exploitation, political coercion, military conquest” that have marked the relationship between the West and its colonial others (Ahmad 1992: 164). From there on, Said’s ambivalences and inconsistencies become many indeed. They signally include his attempt to critique Western humanism’s compromised role in colonial history by appealing to the familiar values of liberal humanism itself – “tolerance, accommodation, cultural pluralism and relativism” – and, were that not enough, to also try to reconcile humanism with a Foucauldian “Discourse Theory” whose anti-humanist theoretical underpinnings “no serious intellectual” would fail to recognise (Ahmad 1992: 164). Trying to reconcile the irreconcilable is, for Ahmad, not just a bad intellectual habit on Said’s part, but a symptom of his “self-division”: that same self-division that rendered him unable to let go of his aesthetic and cultural affiliation with “Western High Canonicity”.

It seems to me that, at least with respect to this – other aspects of his polemic, such as the objection to Said’s insertion of Marx’s writings on India in the Orientalist archive, I find, to the contrary, both necessary and convincing (Ahmad 1992: 221-242) – Ahmad’s animosity was misplaced. For it amounted to lambasting Said for not being what he patently was not. Said’s formation was that of a classic European comparatist, very much in the tradition of Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer and Erich Auerbach that he discusses in the first chapter of *Culture and Imperialism*. Indeed, this discussion, in which Said criticizes Curtius’s, Spitzer’s and Auerbach’s Eurocentric bias while at the same praising their ‘mission’ and commitment to engage with the capacious richness and complexity of European languages and literatures, is entirely typical of Said’s intellectual style and generosity (Said 1993: 50-55). Equally characteristic of Said’s intellectual demeanour was his relationship to theory, with which he also maintained a complex and conflicted engagement. Was Said what we call a theorist? For instance, does *Culture and Imperialism* provide a theoretical framework for literary and cultural studies rooted, as Said says of Gramsci’s

writings, in “the territorial, spatial, geographical foundations of social life” (Said 1993: 57)? Or, can we refer to much of his work from *Orientalism* (1978) onward as “postcolonial theory”?

What we know for sure is that Said himself never had time for this kind of thing. He never affiliated with any theoretical school or trend and was always wary of the turf battles associated with labelling theories. His points of references were Giambattista Vico fully as much as Antonio Gramsci, Erich Auerbach as well as Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault. Indeed, if one were to define contemporary theory in terms of a break with the humanist tradition, one would not know on which side of the divide Said should be placed. As Said notes about the academic reception of *Orientalism* in the Afterword to the second edition of the book (1994), which I mentioned before, “*Orientalism* is a partisan book, not a theoretical machine” (Said 1994: 339) – a point to which he returned in one of his last public lectures:

My intellectual approach has been to use humanistic critique to open up the fields of struggle, to introduce a longer sequence of thought and analysis to replace the short bursts of polemical, thought-stopping fury that so imprison us in labels and antagonistic debate whose goal is a belligerent collective identity rather than understanding and intellectual exchange. I have called what I try to do ‘humanism’, a word I continue to use stubbornly despite the scornful dismissal of the term by sophisticated post-modern critics. By humanism I mean first of all attempting to dissolve Blake’s mind-forged manacles so as to be able to use one’s mind historically and rationally for the purposes of reflective understanding and genuine disclosure. Moreover humanism is sustained by a sense of community with other interpreters and other societies and periods: strictly speaking therefore, there is no such thing as an isolated humanist (Said 2004: 874).

In retrospect, Said’s position seems to have been vindicated. For in the

intervening years, as the increasing marginalization of theory has radically diminished the significance of the divisions that fuelled earlier theoretical debates – so much so that we have had a proliferation of books devoted to scrutinising the afterlife of theory and arguing for the need to bring it back as a mode of intellectual engagement more attuned to current cultural and political realities (see, for instance, Eagleton 2003; Elliott & Attridge 2011) – Said's humanism has become the object of an intense critical re-evaluation. As Emily Apter observes in *Against World Literature* (2013), a number of critics have recently emphasised the generative possibilities of Saidian humanism for a worldly critical praxis alert to the cultural differences and political conflicts that still traverse our globalised world – or what Apter describes as a “terrestrial” and “translational humanism [that] bequeaths a literary cartography calibrated to the social life of political cultures in real time” (Apter 2013: 212). Summed up by Apter as the combination of a practice of contrapuntal reading and the politics of secular humanism, this is a mode of critical engagement that is perhaps best displayed in the pages of *Culture and Imperialism*.

Published in the aftermath of the first Gulf War of 1991, *Culture and Imperialism* begins and ends with a passionate denunciation of American global ascendancy and the exceptionalist ideology on which its legitimisation was premised: “the last superpower, an enormously influential, frequently interventionary power nearly everywhere in the world” (Said 1993: 54), Said writes, “Today the United States is triumphalist internationally, and seems in a febrile way eager to prove that it is number one” (Said 1993: 298). Said's focus on the relation between culture and imperialism was dictated by an immediate concern that surfaces again and again in the book, and that is articulated through the construction of homologies between the “structure of feeling” of the literary and cultural texts that testify to the massive presence of imperialism in modern European culture – from Charles Dickens's, Joseph Conrad's, Jane Austen's and Rudyard Kipling's novels to Verdi's *Aida* and Camus's writings –

and the discourse of the new world order promulgated by U. S. state agencies and their intellectual allies at the end of the Cold War. Hence the theory of recursivity that shapes Said's discussion of imperialism: the appearance and reappearance, first in European and then in American culture, of the idea of "*imperium* as [a] protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule" (Said 1993: 10), whereby the civilising mission of earlier empires has been rearticulated through the exceptionalist discourse of "American specialness, altruism, and opportunity" (Said 1993: 8).

The writing of *Culture and Imperialism* was also prompted by a desire to expand the arguments about the East presented in *Orientalism* and "describe a more general pattern of relationships between the modern metropolitan West and its overseas territories" (Said 1993: xi), as well as to fill the main narrative gap in the previous book. "What I left out of *Orientalism*", Said notes, "was that response to Western dominance which culminated in the great movement of decolonization across the Third World" (Said 1993: xii). So, in addition to generalising his earlier Foucauldian insights on how the othering and fixing of non-European identities constituted the epistemic foundation of the colonial enterprise, in *Culture and Imperialism* Said also gives an account of how the 'consolidated vision' of the colonised world produced by imperial culture has been radically subverted by the oppositional political and cultural movements that emerged from the colonial and postcolonial world. Crucially for Said, the legacy of the intellectual currents and figures produced by these movements is marked not so much, or in any case not exclusively by an assertion of radical alterity, but most significantly by what he calls "the voyage in" (Said 1993: 216): that is, by the acts of appropriation performed by writers and intellectuals from the formerly colonised world – Said singles out C. L. R. James and George Antonius as the precursors of this type of cultural work – who "have imposed their diverse histories on, have mapped their local geographies in, the great canonical texts of the European center" (Said 1993: 53), and whose work has

resulted in the production of new hybrid and cosmopolitan cultural formations and identities. Said's polemical target in underscoring the creolised and transnational character of the products of these acts of cultural resistance and opposition are "the old categories, the tight separations, and the comfortable autonomies" (Said 1993: 53) through which cultural boundaries are controlled by "the *police* action of simple dogma and loud patriotism" (Said 1993: 15). In a programmatic passage placed at the end of the first chapter, Said writes that to oppose this dogma and undo the damage it has caused, "we must speak of overlapping territories, intertwined histories common to men and women, whites and non-whites, dwellers in the metropolis and on the peripheries, past as well as present and future" (Said 1993: 61).

I have written elsewhere (Frassinelli forthcoming) about the need to update Said's formulations in light of the geopolitical realignments that have marked the last twenty years: beginning with the decline of American power (Wallerstein) and the socioeconomic dislocations within the neoliberal world order captured by the provocative subtitle of Jean and John Comaroff's recent book *Theory from the South: Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa* (2012). Here I would like to briefly discuss how we can today read Said's own elaboration contrapuntally, as an intervention into the ongoing debates about literature and globalisation, which is also the subject of a short article, "Globalizing Literary Studies" (2001), that Said published in a special issue of *PMLA* with the same title.

As Paul Jay recapitulates in one of the essays included in the volume, "Culture is now being defined in terms less of national interests than of a shared set of global ones. This shift in the cultural role of the nation-state has profound implications for its institutions, particularly its schools, colleges, and universities" (Jay 2001: 32). Speaking about the discipline of English Studies, Jay argues that in order to survive the challenge of globalisation and its progressive overwhelming of local and national subjectivities, identities and cultural

formations, literature curricula ought to be reconfigured in ways that move beyond the national(ist) paradigms with which, especially in canonical areas of the discipline, they have been traditionally identified. Nor, Jay adds, is this just a matter of enlarging the canon to include regional literatures or literatures produced in diasporic conditions – though this is *per se* a preferable option to approaching the latter as culturally discrete, autonomous formations to be positioned in sub-disciplinary locations defined vis-à-vis the traditional areas of the canon. The curricular changes called for by the increasingly globalised context of our disciplinary endeavours should also – or indeed primarily – involve a revision of traditional models of literary history: grounded in the understanding that globalisation is a long historical process that has been evolving since at least the early modern period, this revision should give “primary attention to the historical role literature has had in global systems of cultural exchange and recognize that this exchange has always been multidirectional” (Jay 2001: 42). This, however, does not mean doing away with national literatures once and for all, nor, for that matter, downplaying the powerful cultural identities and attachments that the nation-state still represents in most parts of the world. Rather, the call here is for a properly historicist approach that emphasises how national paradigms are historically, politically and culturally constructed, functional rather than normative.

Such proposals are, of course, not new: one is reminded, in particular, of Edward Said’s suggestion, in *Culture and Imperialism*, that we reread the Western cultural archive “not univocally but *contrapuntally*”, so as to articulate on the one hand the interconnectedness between metropolitan history and “those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominant discourse acts” (Said 1993: 51), and on the other how writers and intellectuals from the formerly colonised world have adapted many of the texts of the Western canon to suit their cultural and political needs (Said 1993: 53). But they undoubtedly take on new urgency under the rubric of globalisation, which

demands that we rethink how we relate to the cultural past in an attempt to cross the discrete national boundaries that have traditionally delimited the “territories of knowledge” (Gunn 2001: 18) within the humanities. Jay’s emphases on the long history of globalisation and the multidirectional cultural processes that it has engendered are therefore all the more apposite and worth retaining. They remind us that the project of globalising literary studies runs the risk in the first place of replacing “the old authoritative, Eurocentric models” with research and pedagogical agendas that no less problematically reflect the “new ascendancy of a globalized, postmodern consciousness from which [...] the gravity of history has been excised” (Said 2001: 66); and, second, of reproducing a one-dimensional, hierarchical and diffusionist “centre-periphery” model – autonomous development at the centre, diffusion of development to the periphery (Blaut 1993) – of globalisation as Westernisation, whereby the periphery is reduced to a site of passive reception and consumption of imported, globally hegemonic cultural forms. My claim, then, is that it is in addressing these issues that Edward Said’s work remains particularly valuable to contemporary literary and cultural studies: both as a model of literary and cultural history and as a flexible and rich set of concepts and suggestions that we can revisit to grapple with pressing interpretative, curricular and disciplinary concerns.

In *Culture and Imperialism* Said offers a definition of culture grounded in the theoretical and methodological assumption “that cultural forms are hybrid, mixed, impure, and the time has come in cultural analysis to reconnect their analysis with their actuality” (Said 1993: 14). As he reiterates in the final paragraph of the book:

No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. [...]

It is more rewarding – and more difficult – to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about 'us' (Said 1993: 336).

The crucial point that Said makes throughout the text is that the attachment to a notion of cultural purity not only circumscribes the space for cultural exchange, but also reproduces hierarchies and divisions which represent one of the legacies of imperialism that we still haven't managed to overcome: "The tragedy [...] of so many postcolonial experiences, derives from the limitations of the attempts to deal with relationships that are polarized, racially uneven, remembered differently" (Said 1993: 18). It is against this background that Said introduces the notion of contrapuntal reading: as a way of rediscovering the entanglements and interconnectedness of the histories that link inextricably together peoples and areas of the globe that are still too often construed as each other's other.

Said's practice of contrapuntal reading goes beyond comparatism. It does not simply show that our reading experience is enhanced by comparing literary and cultural works that belong to different traditions, historical periods or geographical locations. More radically, it illuminates their common ground, the borrowings and exchanges that constitute all literary and cultural formations. It thus helps us to see and theorise their interactions without re-inscribing them into rigidly hierarchical and binary paradigms, which – it is worth underscoring – is not the same as ignoring or downplaying the fact that cultural integration has often taken place, and still takes place, under regimes of inequality, domination and epistemic violence. A contrapuntal perspective, by foregrounding the multidirectional interactions between the subaltern and the dominant, the metropolitan and the peripheral, reconfigures the divisions on which these categories are premised by pointing, in Said's own words, to their "overlapping territories, intertwined histories".

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