Critical Secularism: A Reintroduction for Perilous Times

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This special issue of *boundary 2* was meant from the start as an engagement with the legacies of Edward Said's work. It was meant to suggest a number of directions in which the notion of "secular criticism" may now be inflected while remaining true to the enormous critical energies inherent in its appearance in Said's work. With his sudden passing on September 25, 2003, long feared by those close to him and yet somehow unexpected, this element in the work presented here acquires an aura of inconsolable sadness. What was it that came to us in the form of this person and his work, and what is it that has now passed away? We will be packing and unpacking such questions for a long time to come. Said's work came to the fore at a time when the world of humanistic knowledge was coming to be shaken to its core, its basic assumptions about the possibilities of knowledge seemingly washed away. In the vernacular, these complex developments in the world of thought and culture have long been collectively dubbed "postmodernism," often in the form of an epithet. Said himself of course was deeply influenced by the European thinkers—Adorno, Foucault, Derrida, and Auerbach, above all—whose work is an important element in this

milieu, and he is sometimes seen as belonging fully to it. How little it is still understood that his work was utterly at odds with this contemporary milieu and how differently he read those formative thinkers. Every world he lived in, he inhabited fully, and yet with an uncompromising critical distance. This is the great strength, the beauty, and the paradox of his life.

This special issue brings together a number of studies that take as their starting point Said's relationship to secularism, a relationship that is a critical one in a full and complex sense. At the heart of the Saidian critical project, this collection of essays is meant to propose, is the notion of secular criticism.[1] Long ignored as an object of Said scholarship, in favor of the concept of Orientalism or the rubric of culture and imperialism, this term and its significations are now coming to be seen as a constellation that animates Said's critical practice as a whole. It is the concept that unifies, or brings into articulation, such aspects of Said's work as anti-imperialism, the critique of colonial knowledge, the insistence on the "worldliness" of language and text, the insistence on the connections between criticism and exile, and the seemingly paradoxical attempt to save the work of art for an ultimately individual and isolated aesthetic contemplation. For years, this emphasis and insistence on declaring his affinities with secularism appeared inexplicable or out of date to many of his readers, who, starting as they thought they did from Said's critique of Orientalism and of the imperial basis of modern culture, made simplistic and unexamined gestures of renunciation of Enlightenment thought and its legacies as forms of internal and external domination. This recognition of the need to declare oneself for secularism appears now, in light of the escalating forms of religious politics and violence that have come to dominate political life in multiple locations and across the globe, to have been anachronistic in a double sense, both behind and ahead of its time.

As a number of commentators have pointed out in recent years, Said's use of the term *secular* involves a displacement of its usual significations.[2] Secular criticism in Said's reckoning is, first of all, a practice of unbelief; it is directed, however, not simply at the objects of religious piety but at secular "beliefs" as well, and, at its most ambitious, at all those

1. I have argued this point at some length in Aamir R. Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Autumn 1998): 95–125.
2. See Bruce Robbins, "Secularism, Elitism, Progress, and Other Transgressions: On Edward Said's 'Voyage In,'" *Social Text*, no. 40 (Fall 1994): 25–38; Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul"; and the contributions to this issue by Stathis Gourgouris and Emily Apter.

moments at which thought and culture become frozen, congealed, thing-like, and self-enclosed—hence the significance for him of Lukács's notion of reification.[3] At no point is *secular* used in his work in simple opposition to the religious per se. Above all, his concern has been with domination through the classification and management of cultures, and of human collectivities, into mutually distinct and immutable entities, be they nations, properly speaking, or civilizations or ethnicities. To the great modern system for the classification of cultures Said gave the name Orientalism and viewed the hierarchies of this system as marking the presence of a "reconstructed religious impulse, a naturalized supernaturalism." The emergence of this modern classification of cultures does not represent for Said "a sudden access of objective knowledge" but rather "a set of structures inherited from the past, secularized, redisposed, and re-formed by such disciplines as philology, which in turn were naturalized, modernized, and laicized substitutes for (or versions of) Christian supernaturalism."[4] Secular criticism thus struggles above all with the imposition of national (or civilizational) molds over social and cultural life, against all unmediated and absolute claims of membership in a national (or civilizational) community. This catachrestic use of the term *secular* carries the implication that the energies of nationalism in its very broadest sense are thoroughly religious in nature, in a sense that has nothing whatever to do with whether or not an organized religion or a certain canonized popular religious life plays any role, symbolic or organizing, in this or that nationalism. In this sense, the secularism implied in secular criticism is a *critical secularism*, as I am calling it here, a constant unsettling and an ongoing and never-ending effort at critique, rather than a once-and-for-all declaration of the overcoming of the religious, theological, or transcendental impulse.[5] It implies a critical engagement with secularism itself, a scrupulous effort at recognizing the reemergence of that impulse in the midst of secular culture. To be *critically* secular is also to take on board an understanding of the tainted history of secularism and Enlightenment as icons of the superiority of the West and thus of the legitimacy of its civilizing mission.

The social for Said is inherently and eminently secular, that is, unassimilable to transcendental narratives of any sort, in particular narratives of uniform national belonging. The cultural critic must therefore be constantly

3. See, for instance, Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 230–34; and *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 270–72.
4. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 120–21.
5. I am grateful to my friend Jonathan Arac for suggesting this formulation.

and scrupulously attentive to the dense and secular fabric of social life, making of the conflicts and contradictions of society the ground on which literary and cultural criticism is to be formulated. Secular criticism is thus also an invitation to the crossing of boundaries—boundaries of nation, tradition, religion, race, and language—and carries the implication that the world as a whole can be the only authentic horizon of critical practice. In other words, it conceives of communities of interpretation as inhabiting not self-enclosed life-worlds but rather the world itself, or rather some identifiable but never entirely closed-off corner of the world.

At a very basic level, of course, secular criticism, this rather complex notion, built as it is around a series of displacements, inversions, and mediations, still contains within it a critique of the hope for the hereafter, of religious opiate, of the religious impulse per se. Implicit in its elaboration in Said's work is thus a call for the overcoming of fear: fear of death in the first instance, but also fear as it appears in social life, fear as and when it becomes the basis for social life, which is perhaps the same thing. Overcoming fear of the other is one of the great themes of Said's work, despite the great distance that separates his writing from the conceptual language of psychoanalysis or abstract ethical theory. He was our most important analyst of all those political and cultural impulses that are based on fear of the other, which has been at work in so many of the catastrophes of the last century. At its most ambitious, secular criticism is a praxis for the management of such fear, and, a quarter century after its publication, *Orientalism* may now be read fruitfully as a sustained warning about the global atmosphere of fear that is now our everyday experience in the post–September 11 era. There, he charted meticulously the long history in the modern West of dehumanizing the Arab and Muslim worlds and lay down the challenge of surviving "the consequences humanly," as he put it, of that unequal (but never entirely one-sided) societal and cultural encounter.[6]

There are many sources for the idea of secular criticism in Said's work, and I argued some years ago for the place of Erich Auerbach in Said's development of it. We may of course also point to the dialectical tradition per se, to Adorno and Horkheimer's argument, first of all, about secularizing, Enlightenment thought and its dialectical reliance on, and reversion to, its purported opposite (that is, myth), and, second, to the philosophical anthropology of fear in their work. That the sources for this governing concept in Said's work turn out to be critical traditions that emerged out of a

6. Said, *Orientalism*, 45.

certain experience of Jewish (and, more specifically, German Jewish) exile is paradoxical in some ways, but it is a paradox that is no longer an entirely unfamiliar one, and one that he himself began to think about out loud, in public and in private, in the last few years before his death. Like the European émigré intellectuals who influenced him and with whom he remained preoccupied for much of his career, Said's is an intellectual trajectory profoundly affected by the history of the Jews in the modern era. The recurring turn in his work to such figures as Auerbach, Arendt, and Adorno represents a detailed engagement with this tradition of exile from perspectives made possible by the devastation of Palestinian life in the realization of the Zionist "solution" to the Western crisis surrounding the Jews. It also marks his own perception of the continued imbrications of the figure of the modern intellectual, and of the essentially secular vocation of critique, with the history of the so-called Jewish Question. As I have argued elsewhere, in Said's critical practice, the attitudes and proclivities adumbrated as secular criticism are animated by a concern with, and remain productively tied to, marginality and homelessness, whose exemplary form in the West in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is provided by the Jews.[7]

Said's utter refusal to equate Jewishness or Judaism with Zionism at even the darkest moments of Israeli brutality—an equation that is historically shared by anti-Semitism and Zionism alike—and his frank openness to any Israeli willing merely to recognize the basic fact of the dispossession of the Palestinians, spoke not only of the generosity of spirit for which he was known to those who knew him, but of an utterly secular mind, unclouded by nationalist understandings of history and narratives of collective redemption. He asked of Israelis and Israel's Jewish supporters elsewhere only the basic decency of acknowledging that their deliverance from annihilation in Europe had come at the cost of the Palestinians, who had paid a steep price for it. He often cited a rather quaint-sounding source for this idea: a book called *The Other Side of the Medal*, by Edward Thompson, father of E. P. Thompson, who argued in the 1920s, as the national movement became under Gandhi's leadership for the first time a mass movement against British rule, that the British ought to recognize and take responsibility for the brutality of British rule in India, in particular in the aftermath of India's First War of Independence in the mid-nineteenth century, known to colonial historiography as the Sepoy Mutiny, whose memory lived on, so he argued, in the collective Indian psyche. Said understood like no one else

7. See Mufti, "Auerbach in Istanbul."

the political importance of this ethical gesture of "atonement," as Thompson calls it, and that appeared quaint and irrelevant to some younger Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims, who perhaps thereby considered themselves more radical than he.[8] In the last few years of his life, Said returned to the idea of binationalism in historical Palestine, first propagated in the early twentieth century by, among others, the German Jewish intellectuals associated with the founding of Hebrew University, and supported and publicized by Hannah Arendt, and renewed it, through a critique of the colonial-settler nature of Israeli society, as the authentically secular response to the Israeli-Palestinian situation.[9]

The essays presented in this issue take as their starting point some of these threads in Said's secular critical practice in order to think anew, and in a critical fashion, points of affiliation with the configurations of contemporary secularism. The issue begins with Said's recent essay on Auerbach, first published in the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *Mimesis* in English.[10] Said reads Auerbach as secular critic par excellence—a Prussian Jew escaping Nazi violence who provides the fragments of an alternative history of (Christian) Europe as an exiled observer of Europe's self-destruction. For Said, Auerbach secularizes the history of cultural identifications in Europe and pluralizes it by foregrounding the emergence of the European tradition in interaction with the Jewish culture of the eastern Mediterranean, doing so, furthermore, by displacing this rather large historical question onto the more concrete and philologically graspable question of the mixing or separation of literary styles. In her astute reading of Said's essay, Emily Apter points to Said's use of Auerbach for his own project of a critical humanism that takes on board his own earlier critique of the imperial connections of the Western humanist tradition; and in his inspired, even lyrical, defense of the scrupulously non-transcendentalist imagination, Stathis Gourgouris finds at

8. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 206.
9. For a significant rethinking of the historical meanings of binationalism in Palestine, see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Binationalism and Jewish Identity: Hannah Arendt and the Question of Palestine," in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, ed. Steven E. Ascheim (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 165–80.
10. See Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Fiftieth-Anniversary ed., trans. Willard R. Trask, with a new introduction by Edward W. Said (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003). The essay is republished here with the permission of the estate of Edward W. Said. I am deeply grateful in particular to Mariam Said. My thanks also to my assistant, Indra Mukhopadhyay, for his able help with the manuscript.

the core of Said's critical practice "an exfoliation of the repressed politics of transcendence."

A critical secularism means, first of all, an insistence on the this-worldly nature of all human experience and a critical practice of unbelief—threads that are picked up by Apter and Gourgouris in their essays on Said, but also by Willi Goetschel in his essay on the irreverence of Heinrich Heine, who parodied the claims of religious-national identifications in early nineteenth-century Europe at the same time as he took apart the smug detachment of their secular critique. But it also implies the inclination to sharing social space with others, explored, for instance, in my own contribution here, as well as in those by Gayatri Spivak and Gil Hochberg. Hochberg's essay revives and reinterprets the category of the Levantine, with its resonant colonial history, in order to suggest ways of thinking out of the cultural impasse of the Middle East's political conflict. The essays by Spivak and Ronald Judy take as their point of departure the current global crisis around the figure of the Islamist militant. Spivak's far-reaching essay explores the ethical situation called up by the existence of the suicide bomber, finding in a critical reading of Kant's late writing the possibility for a secularism that is not simply reducible to the workings of calculative reason, and arguing that "[i]f the university is to be secular, it requires a sustained epistemic effort that can only come from the humanities." Judy offers a remarkable reading of the works of Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian Salafist philosopher claimed by the jihadis as intellectual forebear and brutally reinscribed as a "Wahhabi" in the ongoing neo-con war with contemporary Arab society. Qutb emerges in Judy's reckoning surprisingly as a *secularizing* figure, in whose work Islam becomes a matter of *reading*, rather than one of fealty to an unchanging tradition. Against the universalist and leveling tendencies of classic secularist thought and institutions, one strategy of revision proposed by contributors to this issue is to rethink the "vernacular" itself as a space for a refashioning of the secular, as in Judy's essay, but also in Bishnupriya Ghosh's reading of what she calls "postcolonial spectrology," the haunting of global Englishes by the repressed vernacular languages and their literatures in the former colonies. My own essay explores imaginings of India against and across the religious divide in the subcontinent and identifies the lyric tradition in Urdu, long infused with the language of Sufi Islam, as the exemplary site for these secular elaborations. Finally, in a different and more philosophical vein, Akeel Bilgrami argues for the possibility of a "post-classical" secularism that neither rests on an exclusive recourse to "external reasons," as in classical liberal thought, nor collapses into a relativis-

tic pluralism in the face of the multiplication of value- and commitment-sets known as identity politics.

In the very brief time that has passed since his death, it is already becoming clear that Edward Said represented, in a strong sense, the re-emergence of the classic figure of the secular universal intellectual, but, paradoxically, in an age—the post-Sartrean age—in which it was thought that the mediations embodied in such a figure had become impossible. Said himself embodied both those mediations and the skepticism about their possibility. His uniqueness in the history of this characteristic figure of the modern era is of course that he emerged to fulfill this role from the formerly colonized world and formulated the question of the struggle against the imperialization of the world as the universal question of the modern era. In this sense, he brought to completion possibilities that had already emerged in such a figure as Frantz Fanon but had remained only partially developed, as evidenced in the patron- and tutor-like relationship that Sartre was able to assume toward the latter, most famously in the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*. If the life and work of Said is a unique historical event, if we are right to suspect that there will never again be an intellectual figure like him, this is not just for reasons of individual genius and talent but because he represented the first full development of "the voyage in," as he himself called it, of the colonized and marginalized world into the global-imperial "center," which occurred gradually, and for the first time in history, in the course of the twentieth-century, and which transformed both forever.[11] He could have appeared only when he did—at the moment of the emergence of a global agglomeration of cultural networks, a conflicted but nevertheless *global civilization*, if I may be permitted such a seemingly antiquarian (and paradoxical) formulation, but one which seems particularly apt with respect to Said. He was the first, and perhaps last, universal intellectual of this era of globalization and was himself singularly "Levantine" in the sense Hochberg elaborates here, formed at the crisscrossing of languages, cultures, religions, political histories, distinct and divergent historical temporalities, and forms of cultural authority, which will never again be reproduced.

Edward Said emerged as a figure in an era of diminished expectations—the aftermath of the revolutionary and anticolonial movements of the early to mid-twentieth century. His work is infused with an attempt to live with this sense of diminishment and loss—the attenuation of utopian hopes for emancipation and transformation of world society, the loss of a sense of

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11. See Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

plenitude in collective human life—without sentimental brooding, on the one hand, but also without simple-minded optimism or cheerfulness. He spoke of this dogged and late persistence of the hope for a better life—"once the attempt to change the world miscarried," as Adorno once put it[12]—as the essentially secular attitude. Whether and to what degree we, his readers, have been successful in learning this lesson, as individuals or collectively, and whether and to what degree we will be able to live with the loss of his presence among us, it is probably too early to tell. For the humanities in the universities and related cultural institutions, his death poses an enormous challenge—to undertake the effort to secularize our thought and our lives—and we owe it to ourselves, to those we teach or inform, and also to Said himself for the gift of energetic thinking that he gave to us, to repeatedly clarify precisely what this challenge is.

12. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1987), 3.