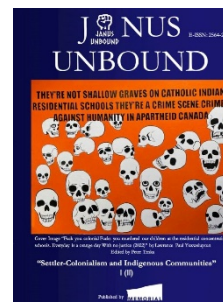


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Review of *Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said* by Timothy Brennan and *On Edward Said: Remembrance of Things Past* by Hamid Dabashi

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Brennan, Timothy. *Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 464 pages.

Dabashi, Hamid. *On Edward Said: Remembrance of Things Past*. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020), 250 pages.

Over the past three years, a number of outstanding books have been published on the life and work of Palestinian-American scholar and activist Edward W. Said. Published in 2019, Flemish scholar Nicolas Vandeviver's *Edward Said and the Authority of Literary Criticism* was the first to make use of the Edward W. Said archives at Columbia University. The same archives have been used much more extensively by Said's former student Timothy Brennan. Additionally, Hamid Dabashi puts into a single volume essays, articles, and chapters written on various occasions, beginning with his 2003 obituary of Said. Brennan and Dabashi's books demonstrate continued interest in Edward W. Said and his thought close to 20 years after his death, and the wealth of new material about his life and times that has become accessible since.

Brennan is well acquainted with both the man and his ideas; his long-awaited biography of Said is the first book outside of Said's own reflections to study his life with such care and detail. The book is particularly well researched, drawing on 96

interviews with Said's family, friends, students, and antagonists, spanning from August 2015 to March 2019 across the US, Europe, and the Middle East. For personal details and the dispelling of myths, Brennan leans on Said's sisters Jean and Grace, as well as his children, Najla and Wadie, and most of all his wife Mariam (418). Extensive use is made of nine separate archives to research the life of Said, ranging from those of his former school at Mount Hermon to the vast amount of material available at Columbia University where he taught from 1963. Brennan's book brings a wealth of new material and is set to become the standard biography of Edward W. Said.

Places of Mind gives equal importance to Said as a man, thinker, and public intellectual. There was much more to Said than just being the author of important books like *Orientalism*. Brennan's biography provides a treasure trove of details on Said's personal quirks, his predilection to smoking, Burberry suits, and particular brands of mineral water. Exploration of the various archives has enabled Brennan to use years of correspondence and unpublished manuscripts, bringing valuable material on Said as a thinker. One learns, for example, that Michel Foucault once wrote to Said: "I infinitely admire your intelligence, your mastery, and the rigor of your analyses to the point that on many points you have helped me clarify the nature of my own future work" (176); or, that Jacques Derrida wrote to Said to thank him for his "magnificent book" *After The Last Sky*:

in every line the political and poetic gestures are tied together in the same analysis ...
Your text and these extraordinary photographs work at once as an allegory of a people in its destiny which, given its unending suffering, it no longer allows to be allegorized. (237-238)

Said's correspondence also reveals letters from the likes of Patricia Highsmith, Jodie Foster, Vanessa Redgrave (326, 328), and even a Christmas card from Ronald Reagan in 1987 (221). On the other hand, he also received numerous death threats from Zionist elements and his office was firebombed (217-18). The New York City Police Department once considered his life to be in enough danger to install a panic button in his apartment.

All periods of Said's life are meticulously researched. The book is particularly interesting on his time in Lebanon in the early 1970s and how this period was key to his intellectual and political development. This biography enables us to have a broader and more detailed view of some known episodes of Said's life. For example, we know from Paul Buhle's 1987 biography of C.L.R. James that Said visited him at his Railton Road in Brixton in 1987. Thanks to Brennan's biography we now also know that the meeting lasted an hour and a half and that it was only when Said mentioned that he played the piano that the two men settled in and talked almost exclusively about Beethoven's piano sonatas (313-14).

Places of Mind offers some surprising new information. It highlights Said's attempts to write fiction at various stages of his life; he started but abandoned writing two novels, poetry, and short stories (86-92, 279-82). One learns that Erich Auerbach's family vetoed a project of Said's to publish a collection of his essays (236), and that Said's 1983 book *The World, the Text and the Critic* was translated by the Syrian Ministry of Culture in a pirated edition that remained unavailable outside Syria (336). Like T.W. Adorno, Said expelled protesting students from his classroom in February 1969 and called security when they refused to do so (125). Said was very clear in the conviction that the classroom should not become a place to advocate political ideas and was very much against the teaching of literature as a form of politics.

Brennan's book is sympathetic to Said and his ideas, but is not an uncritical hagiography. In particular, Said's 1993 *Culture and Imperialism* is subjected to some interesting criticisms (291-98). Brennan finds, for instance, that Said "somewhat dubiously reversed the commonly understood temporal order of imperialism and colonialism" (295). Sometimes the book sharpens our understanding of Said's ideas; for example, while for many "counterpoint" and "contrapuntal" seem to mean "a more supple, nonconfrontational kind of reading," Brennan opposes the idea as "not one of harmony but one of confrontation" (306).

There are some surprising omissions. In the pages about Said and his students (241-44) there is no mention of the fact that Barack Obama studied for some time under Said. According to David Remnick's 2010 book *The Bridge: The Life and Rise of Barack Obama*, Said's theoretical approach in the course left Obama cold, and the young Obama referred to Said as a "flake." Brennan discusses books where Said appears as a fictional character (329) but there is no mention of the fact that "Harvard Professor George Issa Qumdis," a villain in Chapter 33 of Jonathan Kellerman's 2004 right-wing thriller *Therapy*, was based on Edward Said, the closest Said came to being appropriated by popular culture.

In terms of a general biography of Said, Brennan's book is likely to remain unsurpassed. Future biographies of Said are likely to concentrate on specific aspects or periods of his life, as for example M.D. Walhout's 2020 *Arab Intellectuals and American Power: Edward Said, Charles Malik and the US in the Middle East*, a dual biography of Said and his relative Charles Malik illustrates. Highly readable, *Pieces of Mind* will appeal to both the general reader and the expert and enables the reader to move from Said the man to Said the theorist and public intellectual, and back from Said the theorist and activist to Said the man, making our understanding of Said much more concrete. Last but not least, unlike expensive academic volumes, the book has an affordable price, which can only encourage many more people to read it.

In the words of Hamid Dabashi, author of *On Edward Said: Remembrance of Things Past*, "This volume is something of an intellectual autobiography of my prolonged

and fruitful relationship with the late Edward W. Said (1935-2003)—at once personal, collegial and intellectual and all of that in the spirit of political comradeship” (1). Dabashi is a professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York and knew Said personally since about 1989. While highly sympathetic to Said’s work, Dabashi comes from a different intellectual tradition, much influenced by the Iranian Jalal Al-e-Ahmad, Philip Rieff, and George Maksidi, and builds his own work around a set of essays on particular themes. Dabashi also emphasizes his “habitual Marxist spin to postcolonial theory” (10) as his essay on Rosa Luxemburg as “the unsung hero of postcolonial theory” illustrates (195ff.).

Giving a sense of conversation and debate with Said’s contributions, Dabashi writes that,

I decided to put these pieces together as a record of my recollections, of how I have read and responded to Said, as an act of remembrance of things past. The future of our critical thinking depends on our recollections of this past. How we respond to the most pressing crisis of our day depends on how we keep a record of our own location next to towering figures who have bracketed our intellectual life. (5)

The book provides a collection of reminiscences, travelogues, and essays that document the author’s own close and long-standing scholarly, personal, and political relationship with Said. The first travelogue, mainly about Jerusalem and Ramallah, recalls how Dabashi took a fistful of soil from a sacred gravesite near al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem to Lebanon and put it on Said’s gravesite. The other travelogue in the book is about how Dabashi was driven from Jerusalem to Nablus by Hany Abu-Assad’s assistant while he was location scouting for his widely praised 2005 movie *Paradise Now*. The chapter, as a result, has a decidedly filmic dimension to its narrative. Film is a central interest for Dabashi, who devotes another chapter to Palestinian cinema and one about the problems he had to face for organizing a Palestinian film festival at Columbia in the last few months of Said’s life.

The majority of chapters in Dabashi’s book deal with the problem of intellectuals. Dabashi is skeptical about the notion of “exilic intellectuals” (89ff.), who Said saw as the locus of dissent. Dabashi argues that the exilic condition actually generates what he calls “Comprador Intellectuals,” who will sell their souls to the highest bidder. They are immigrants, either scholars or academics, intellectuals with close connections to US centers of power, and the military establishment in particular:

To understand the political climate and the social conditions in which the comprador intellectuals in general and the native informers in particular fermented and emerged in the United States of the neoconservative era, it is imperative not to be limited by the notion of exilic intellectuals as Said understood it, which is effectively a sword and can cut both ways—for every Said there are at least ten Fouad Ajamis. (149)

Regarding other types of intellectuals, Dabashi provides particularly useful criticisms of Michael Ignatieff (140-48), exposing the intellectual charlatanism of his liberal democratic “rule of law” defense of torture. In the clash between Said and Bernard Lewis, Dabashi “was and ... remain[s], squarely on Said’s side”:

But that was not, nor is it now, a merely political position; rather it was and is a potently moral and intellectual disposition. The difference between the two men was the difference between the politics of lucrative power and the intellectual courage to revolt. (217-18)

Dabashi provides an interesting contrast between Said and Slavoj Žižek. Said cared deeply about Palestine, and from this site of contestation extrapolated his politics and ethics of responsibility towards the rest of the world, whereas Žižek knows “widely and variedly but never deeply and particularly,” and here is the root of his “political proclivity for vacuous abstractions” (164). Unlike Said, Žižek’s thinking was never primarily rooted in a particular struggle or conflict, the consequence of this being that his work will never be solidly politically anchored.

The central idea that Dabashi wants to present is what he calls “reading Said in another key”:

Said raised the truth of the Palestinian struggle to the metamorphic power of a metaphor from which no human being can come to moral consciousness. Translating Said into another key is to reach for the metamorphic quintessence of his power and elocution, where the truth of the Palestinian cause reaches out to touch the nobility of any other cause attentive to the originary language of his towering ability to speak truth to power. (188)

While Brennan’s book is about the life of Said, with chapters titles such as “Mourning Edward Said,” or “Edward Said’s *Orientalism*: Forty Years Later,” Dabashi’s *On Edward Said: Remembrance of Things Past* is mainly about the persistent presence of Said, close to 20 years after his death. One feels that Dabashi has a particular urge to address younger generations who have not personally experienced the intellectual and political debates of Said’s generation.

Today, a close and critical reading of Said’s seminal masterpiece(s) requires an even more radical dismantling of the European project of colonial modernity and all its ideological trappings. Said paved the way and pointed us in the right direction. The treacherous path ahead requires not just the sparkles of his critical thinking but also the grace of his courage and imagination. (193)

Timothy Brennan and Hamid Dabashi’s books will certainly be encouraging readers in this direction.

Biography

Liam Ó Ruairc is a widely published writer and author of *Edward W. Said as Critical Intellectual: Speaking Truth in the Face of Power* (2020) and *Peace or Pacification?: Northern Ireland After the Defeat of the IRA* (2019).