

Review: The Wake of Edward Said

Reviewed Work(s): Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography by Edward Said;  
Waiting for the Barbarians: A Tribute to Edward W. Said by Müge Gürsoy Sökmen and  
Basak Ertür; The Legacy of Edward W. Said by William V. Spanos

Review by: Conor McCarthy

Source: *College Literature*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (Fall 2010), pp. 195-203

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27917770>

Accessed: 12-05-2020 12:09 UTC

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# The Wake of Edward Said

Conor McCarthy

Said, Edward, 2007. *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*. New York: Columbia University Press. \$80.00 hc, \$27.00 sc. 248 pp.

Sökmen, Müge Gürsoy, and Basak Ertür, eds. 2008. *Waiting for the Barbarians: A Tribute to Edward W. Said*. London: Verso. \$100.00 hc, \$29.95 sc. xx + 204 pp.

Spanos, William V. 2009. *The Legacy of Edward W. Said*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. \$70.00 hc, \$25.00 sc. 288 pp.

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Edward Said died in 2003, leaving a complex and peculiar legacy. Many, even those who were unsympathetic to his work, would agree that he had become one of the foremost Anglophone critics of the last thirty years; certainly he is one of the most famous. Of course, Said's fame was partly due to the factors which made his enemies disparage him—his status as a public intellectu-

al and his activism in the cause of Palestine. One of the recurring themes of Said commentary has been to determine the relationship between the political activity and the literary critical concerns and arguments.

In the introduction to his large retrospective collection of essays, *Reflections on Exile*, which brought together his writings on Palestine and on literary and theoretical issues for the first time, Said himself made one major connection clear when he explicitly linked “criticism” and “exile” (Said 2000, xi). If the cover-image of the British edition of the book was of Dante, the great exiled writer, Said’s interest has always been more in exiled intellectuals than in exiled literary writers as such. So while he has written extensively of Conrad (of which more below) and Swift, his critical focus was always more on figures such as Erich Auerbach, Theodor Adorno, C.L.R. James, and Frantz Fanon. These were figures who Said believed had made a break with what he called *filiative* intellectual and political relations, and alienated by exile, had forged new *affiliative* relations and structures for themselves. Rather than depend on or benefit by the structures—social, political, intellectual—in which they were formed, they all made crucial breaks in their careers and created new forms of work, intellectual practice, and political alignment. Auerbach produced in his exile in Istanbul his masterwork, *Mimesis*; his American exile from Nazism drove Adorno not towards a sense of identification with liberal capitalism but into the most trenchant critique, in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Minima Moralia*; assigned to work for the French government in Algeria, Fanon joined the FLN and produced *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Said’s trajectory has been similar in many ways, but there are also crucial differences. In the reviewing Said’s political essays in the 1990s, Tom Nairn sympathetically wrote of Said’s fate as a member of the exiled Palestinian *haute-bourgeoisie*:

an intellectual earmarked for escape and successful metropolitan assimilation has turned back, and tried to assume the burden of those left behind. The burden is a crushing one. In a sense frankly admitted in these pages, it is too much for him or for any other individual ... [*The Politics of Dispossession*] reads like a memoir of the Stations of the Cross, one continuous journey through the agonies and humiliations which have broken him apart. (Nairn 1994, 7)

Nairn is recognizing here that in the context of a late-colonial struggle like that in Israel/Palestine, Said’s radical affiliative move was, to a degree, to reassert his link with his national patrimony, to reach back from his metropolitan location and training in the American academy and the Atlantic intellectual *avant-garde*, to his familial and national history, and to try to do them justice. This goes a long way to explaining Said’s apparently paradoxical Tory

radicalism, his ambivalent humanism, his combination of Palestinian advocacy and polyglot cosmopolitanism.

It was these contradictions and swerves that made Said the compelling figure he was, and also that allows us to review together the three very different books in hand here. Firstly, we have Said's own first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, now reissued in a new paperback edition by Columbia University Press; secondly, a conference proceedings volume, edited by Muge Gürsoy Sökmen and Basak Ertür, *Waiting for the Barbarians: A Tribute to Edward W. Said*; lastly, a striking new study of Said by William V. Spanos, *The Legacy of Edward W. Said*.

Joseph Conrad was one of the great constants in Said's intellectual life, "a steady groundbass" to much of his experience as he put it in a meditation on writing his memoir, *Out of Place* (Said 1998, 3). Conrad was the subject of the only conventional single-author study Said ever wrote, and would receive extensive treatment again in *Beginnings* (1975), *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Over the years, the treatment of Conrad changed: it was not until *Culture and Imperialism* that Conrad was explored in a manner that many would expect given Said's status within postcolonial literary studies. But this is not to say that there are not continuities between Said's early and later treatment of Conrad. There are crucial continuities, but they work more at the conceptual level than that of overt content.

This reviewer is not equipped to argue for or against the importance of Said's first book to Conrad studies. The irony may be that *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, first published in 1965, has been overtaken by studies owing more to Said's later work. However, this does not invalidate the book's interest or value. Indebted to the phenomenologically-inflected work of the Geneva School, in which Said found a useful alternative to the regnant New Criticism, the book seeks to offer a context for Conrad's shorter fiction in his extensive correspondence. The overall project is to provide a portrait of Conrad's "mind" and "work," one of the goals of such phenomenological criticism (Said 2007, 111). Of course, what we notice now is that such a critical approach is not so interested in matters of genre and form, ideology, or historical and political context. Said divides Conrad's life up into three broad phases. The first, from the 1880s until roughly 1912, is what we might call Conrad's great phase, when most of the masterworks were written. This was a phase of the Polish writer's life characterized by a struggle to write, and an unfulfilled struggle towards certainty—his narratives are ambivalent, his tales marked by vagueness and ambiguity, and the truth is always ultimately inaccessible. A second phase is much more comfortable, and in it Conrad creates the persona of the "great writer," though the period is

ended by the rupture of the First World War. For Said, this period is best represented by the masterful short story “The Secret Sharer,” where the hero is shadowed by a terrible secret. In the last phase, from 1918 up to Conrad’s death in 1924, Conrad concludes that a major civilizational phase had finished with the end of the war, and he is able to attain some sense of serenity and peace, although purchased at a great cost. Europe was in ruins, but by means of literary-intellectual ruses of self-persuasion, Conrad could survey Western culture and his own place in it with equanimity.

Said’s argument is that in his writing, Conrad was finding models or analogies for his own life. What interests him in particular is the *drama* of Conrad’s consciousness, as he negotiates the interlinked thickets of his own psychic-intellectual development and his historical environment. If T.E. Lawrence once referred to himself as a “standing civil war,” then Said saw Conrad in similar terms. It was this oscillating, unresolved consciousness that interested Said. The modernist complications of Conrad’s narratives, their various voices, their vaguenesses and ambiguities, their scepticism about almost all ideological positions, coupled as it is with a pressing need to explore those same positions, their interest in extreme environments—all of these may be read as a dramatization of Conrad’s own psychic struggles and inner conflicts. Repeatedly in Said’s more famous later works, such as *Beginnings*, *Orientalism*, or *Culture and Imperialism*, one finds a residual stress on the writer’s consciousness, on a writer struggling in a particularly conflicted situation. One thinks of Said’s interest in Swift, or Camus, or Adorno, writers and intellectuals who found themselves in extraordinarily complex and fraught intellectual and political situations, and whose writing can be construed both as influenced directly by those situations and as a set of strategies for dealing with them. Of course, Edward Said himself is an obvious addition to this list. But Said also took from Conrad a radical scepticism about language and its capacity to grasp its object, its vulnerability to debasement and corruption, its inadequacy to human predicaments. It is therefore entirely in keeping with Said’s original interest in Conrad that he would open up a discussion of empire, narrative, and interpretation in the much later *Culture and Imperialism* with a compressed but brilliant reading of *Heart of Darkness*. In spite of the thematic differences between the two studies, they still share fundamental themes and principles. Accordingly, one can reasonably argue that *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* is of foundational importance to Said’s whole *oeuvre*. Although the book has been out of print for some time, it remains a crucial building block in the construction of the body of Saidian criticism which has since so influenced Conrad studies.

*Waiting for the Barbarians*, edited by Müge Güroy Sökmen and Basak Ertür, serves in this review essay to give us a snapshot of the range of atti-

tudes to Said since his death. To that extent, it shifts us to the end of Said's career and to its aftermath, and along with William Spanos's *The Legacy of Edward W. Said*, it also offers one map of the context in which we now read Said's earliest work. It is the product of a conference on Said held in Istanbul in May 2007, and brings together an uneven but frequently interesting collection of essays, not all of them by academic critics.

The book opens with a Preface by Mariam Said, where she recalls her husband's famous enthusiasm for, and wonder at, the writing by Auerbach of *Mimesis* in his Turkish exile during the Second World War. One of the best essays in the collection, by Tuncay Birkan, gently and sympathetically complicates Said's vision of Auerbach in Istanbul. If Auerbach felt his experience of Istanbul in less dramatic terms than Said suggested, then the story is metaphorically useful all the same. Birkan notes that Turkey was by the time of Auerbach's (and Leo Spitzer's) sojourn there ruled by an aggressively modernizing, authoritarian-nationalist regime, which recruited European scholars to help add to its literature and culture; for Birkan, "Istanbul" is therefore a different symbol or signifier from what it is for Said. Nevertheless, via a reading of Jacques Ranciere, Birkan redeploys Said to discuss the burgeoning Turkish alternative/critical publishing scene, using Said's metaphor of "interference" (Said 2000, 145). His point is that since its nationalist revolution, and since the military coup of 1980, Turkey has been primarily a Cold War/NATO power, not a decolonizing Third or Second World country, standing as much in need of Said's model of critical public intellectual practice as of being viewed through the prism of the "Other."

The other Turkish contribution to the volume, by Meltem Ahiska, is less historical and more theoretical. Ahiska focuses on the relations of "Orientalism" and "Occidentalism." In a dense essay on the meanings of Occidentalism, Ahiska contests the work of Avishai Margalit and Ian Buruma, seeing Occidentalism as intertwined and dialectically related to Orientalism. It should be noted that Ahiska is not interested in Orientalism (or Occidentalism) as a discipline. Rather she sees Occidentalism as providing a space for enabling the sovereignty or agency of the Other, not simply allowing the Other to "other" the West. The crucial issue for her might be how this interacts with nationalism, which is always Janus-faced, both modern and anti-modern, Enlightened and Romantic.

Timothy Brennan's essay looks at the under-examined importance to Said of Giambattista Vico. In an argument related to his work in *Wars of Position*, Brennan argues that Said's work not only cut against what he sees as the Heideggerian trend in American criticism in the late 1970s and 1980s, but also can be retrospectively pitched against contemporary Spinozism. One of the tasks Vico set himself in *The New Science* was to critique both Cartesian

and Spinozist thought. In more immediately contemporary and polemical terms, Brennan is pitching Said against the contemporary Spinozism of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, as well as that of Paolo Virno. What is more confusing, however, is Brennan's claim that Said never diagnosed the Spinozist current, and yet one notes that as early as "Traveling Theory," Said was describing Foucault's conception of power as Spinozist. Brennan's vision of Said's humanism, which is heavily informed by his interest in Vico, is nevertheless important and useful. Vico, Brennan is suggesting, offered Said a kind of protection against the powerful poststructuralist virus, and gave his humanism its radicalism.

Brennan's essay tends to be allusive rather than rigorously worked-out, and this is a problem which besets Rashid Khalidi's contribution also, though he does give a handy contextualization of Said's political function, one might say, in America. Saree Makdisi, on the other hand, offers an extended and cogent re-reading of Said's vision of intellectual practice. His concern is that Said's model of intellectual practice, which he reads principally from *Representations of the Intellectual*, Said's Reith Lectures, and the oddly neglected essay "Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies, and Community," is predicated on a "modernist style" (Sökmen and Ertür 2008, 61). How, Makdisi asks, is this to function in our "postmodern" age, with its pervasive electronic media, its ever-more commercialized publishing industries and universities? Is there the risk that Said's model of the critical intellectual is increasingly ineffective? The problem with Makdisi's analysis, though, is that Said's model was not based simply on style, in spite of his interest in consummate stylists such as Glenn Gould and Adorno, let alone on a modernist sense of the isolated intellectual. Said famously combined, in ways his intellectual opponents such as Aijaz Ahmad never grasped, a Romantic image of the intellectual as a brave individual bearing dramatic witness in public with a distinctly postmodern stress on mobility, fluidity, border-crossing, exile, and the abandonment of the redoubts of power.

Gauri Viswanathan tackles Said's secularist rhetoric in a fascinating essay that explores the relationship of "worldly" criticism to its antecedents in Christian and religious thought. Starting with a passage from Said's essay on Massignon, which displays a sympathy for mysticism, Viswanathan discusses Said's work through Vincent Pecora's study of criticism and secularity, and also discussions of Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg. The result is a brilliant complication of our understanding of Said's sense of criticism, showing that his anti-authoritarianism could be related to certain strands in religious thought. Essays by historians of Israel/Palestine Joseph Massad and Ilan Pappé move us more firmly from the academic to the political. Massad discusses Said's attitude to "the visual," via

a well-known interview by W.J.T. Mitchell, and discusses Said's writing in parallel with Jean Mohr's photographs in *After the Last Sky* and the artwork of Mona Hatoum. Pappé offers a useful discussion of the reception of Said in Israel, although his essay is not as complete as a comparable piece published some years ago by Ella Shohat.

The more directly political essays by Karma Nabulsi and Raja Shehadeh are very interesting and valuable. Nabulsi cleverly flips the usual image of the intellectual's relationship to her audience around, and discusses what the Palestinian people could be said to have given Said. She describes the atmosphere of excitement and ferment that characterized Palestinian politics in the 1960s and early 1970s in Jordan and Lebanon. It was into this world that Said inserted himself after the disaster of 1967, and it formed part of the context from which *Beginnings* and *Orientalism* emerged. She then leaps forward to the anger, articulated so brilliantly by Said, at the inequities of the Oslo "peace process" of the 1990s. Nabulsi focuses particularly on the Civitas Project, a popular/civic mobilization of the Diaspora in the wake of Oslo, by which it was largely disempowered, most obviously because the Palestine National Council was sidelined and the Palestine Legislative Council was instituted in the Territories in its place. Shehadeh's excellent, scholarly, and important essay shows how the PLO allowed the legal ground to be cut from under its own feet at the 1991 Madrid Conference, and then during Oslo, by abrogating its own Algiers principles of 1988 and by taking little or no legal advice. Shehadeh's account notably points out the function of the Israeli Civil Administration and the process of land registration, which eventually allowed the Israelis to hand over administration of land which Palestinians own to the Palestinian Authority while retaining, right through Oslo, the right to control the land originally set aside for the settlements. This is a vital, and dispiriting, essay.

Taken overall, *Waiting for the Barbarians* amounts to less than the sum of its parts. Some essays are relatively brief squibs; others are detailed and scholarly treatments. That by Mahmood Mamdani makes no effort to locate itself vis-à-vis Said's work at all. Those by Elias Khoury and Fawwaz Taboulsi seem at times chaotic and cry out for editorial attention. But the pieces by Birkan, Viswanathan, Nabulsi, and Shehadeh are worthwhile additions to the body of work on Said's legacy.

That legacy, conceived in the highest theoretical terms, is the remit of William Spanos's study. Spanos is well-known in America as a distinguished critic, a long-time professor at SUNY Binghamton, and the founder-editor of *boundary 2*, in its time one of the most important American critical-theoretical journals. These accomplishments alone would make any book by Spanos on Said noteworthy, but there are other interesting connections both

within the terms of this review and more widely. Firstly, Spanos is the leading figure of a specifically American form of left-Heideggerianism, not unrelated to the left-Foucauldianism of his colleague and former student Paul Bové. This brings him at least partly into the sights of Timothy Brennan in his pitching of Said *against* American Heideggerianism as discussed above. Secondly, Spanos has a particular and unusual personal connection with Said: he taught for a number of years at Mount Hermon, the Massachusetts prep school that Said attended in his middle to late teens in the 1950s. Spanos did not teach Said, but the connection is an intriguing one nevertheless, one which they only acknowledged to each other well into their respective careers, and it is the subject of an interesting if slightly self-regarding chapter of this study.

Spanos's book is in many respects the most striking and daring contribution to "Said studies" that has yet emerged. If the most persuasive analysts of Said's work since his death have largely been of a Marxist orientation—by Brennan himself, of course, but also Benita Parry—and have had considerable success in prising Said away from American poststructuralism and from Foucault (a process Said himself initiated), then Spanos's book is notable as a full-throated re-appropriation of Said for those currents. One does not need to agree with Spanos to recognise the force and ingenuity of his work.

Spanos's ultimate claim is that Said's critique of the American institutionalization and emasculation of the radical potential of poststructuralism is actually countermanded by his own work and trajectory. This argument is predicated on a number of (debateable) suppositions: firstly, that Foucault was as heavily influenced by Heidegger as by (for example) Nietzsche; secondly, that there is a homology discernable between Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics and Foucault's panoptic model of power; thirdly, the importance of Foucault for Said; fourthly, a homology between the Heideggerian argument for the "end of philosophy" and Said's critique of empire. Said, for Spanos, enacts a kind of corporealization or performative embodiment of the end of empire: "Said as the End of Empire itself," one might say. This is an astonishingly dramatic and in many ways attractive suggestion. It amounts not only to a powerful appropriation of Edward Said, but also to an intervention into the whole course of American criticism over the last several decades. At a time when poststructuralist criticism is fully institutionalized, when postcolonial criticism has lost some of its lustre, Spanos's radical re-interpretation is valuable and exciting.

Unfortunately, it also seems to be built on some limited and questionable grounds. In spite of his interest in Heidegger, Spanos never examines Said's background in phenomenology, and ignores his first two books, the Conrad book and *Beginnings* (1975), completely. He largely ignores *The*

*World, the Text, and the Critic*. He reserves fairly severe criticism for *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, on the basis that this book has been taken by some to be a summation of Said's humanism, an obviously dubious supposition, as even a brief reading of Said's work reveals that his humanism is worked out at much greater length and with much greater seriousness in *Beginnings* and *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Spanos also ignores Said's writing on music and the work on "late style," which although unfinished would considerably complicate his image of Said's conservative humanism. Instead, he concentrates on *Orientalism*, *Culture and Imperialism*, and *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. Certain errors or glancing comments do not add to one's confidence: arguing that Said was a Foucauldian "specific intellectual" (75); arguing that Said's exilic sense was developed only as late as *Culture and Imperialism* (110); lumping such writers as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and C.L.R. James in with a rejection of humanism.

*The Legacy of Edward W. Said* is, finally, an odd work. Its Heideggerian re-reading of Said is erudite and interesting, but also seems somewhat forced and cyclopean. From *Beginnings* onwards, Said demonstrated a particular capacity to mobilize and weave together multiple influences and sources, and to reduce the strands feeding into his work—for even the best polemical reasons—to non-attributable homologies with one great philosopher's work seems a project perhaps more suited to an essay than a book. Nevertheless, Spanos's work takes its place beside that of Paul Bové, James Clifford, William Hart, Timothy Brennan, and Abdirahman Hussein as amongst the most stimulating treatments we have yet seen of a critic whose importance seems only to grow as the years pass since his untimely death.

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