

Edward Said and Roland Barthes: Criticism versus Essayism.

Or: Roads and Meetings Missed.

You can only answer the old questions by posing new ones.

Marx

Where to Begin? / Beginnings

Any summary, in one chapter, of any writer's life, work and ideas is sure to be cursory in scope; and then to *compare* a writer with another, across languages and cultures, even if there is a chronological overlap, is bound to be an even taller order. It is crucial consequently that a rule of thumb must be introduced that allows for both 'comparatees' to move from the fixed positions in which academic and literary studies have placed them, and which we might call 'parametrics'. If the image and overall idea of a writer is to be put forward, then any comparison with another writer must, necessarily, shift (if only partially) the terrain upon which that image has been built in order for any meaningful and 'equal' meeting to take place.

It is with this parametric *caveat* in mind that this chapter aims to allow a meeting to take place, fictionally of course, but with the slightly curious idea in mind that Roland Barthes, whilst a young 'lecteur' in Alexandria in Egypt in 1949-1950, might have crossed paths (unknowingly) with an adolescent Edward Said then living in Cairo. This chapter argues then, on the one hand, that Barthes and Said are infinitely approachable,

and in three key ways; on the other, that their fundamental concerns as critics are ultimately divergent.

Firstly, both were forthright critics of Western stereotypes, especially of the non-European ‘Other’ (in *Mythologies* and *Orientalism*), this despite a ‘colonial’ genealogy being common to both¹, with Barthes now even being considered as a precursor of post-colonialism, exerting influences on postcolonial writers such as a certain wing of the Moroccan avant-garde based around the 1960s journal *Souffles* (especially Abdelkébir Khatibi and Tahar Ben Jelloun).² Having been radicalised at roughly the same time (Barthes by May 1968 and Said by the Six Day War of 1967³), both writers, aware of a critic’s responsibility, were looking for an anti-reification which was strongly Lukácsian in both cases, if only implicitly. The ‘non-will-to-possess’, or N.W.P., (formalised in the last pages of Barthes’s 1977 treatise on the language of love⁴) was an emphasis that began to dominate Barthesian ethics in the 1970s and has clear echoes in Saidian anti-imperialism, what in *Orientalism* is called the ‘nonrepressive’ and ‘non-manipulative’. Indeed, as Aamir Mifti argues⁵, ‘contemporary Theory is clearly animated by an anti-imperialist impulse’. Secondly, Barthes’s reading of Balzac’s *Sarrasine* in *S/Z* suggested to Said a politics of literary criticism that became sorely lacking in the 1980s debates around the text and the critic. It has been suggested that Said soon dispensed with the textualised post-structuralism that grew up around such texts by Barthes and by others of the post-68 period. However, I want to show how a constant engagement with Barthesian ideas is an important element in Said’s critical theory and practice. Finally, both Said and Barthes wrote, to lesser and greater extents – and this will be the nub of this comparison – as consummate *essayists*, who, both playful and acerbic in their commentaries, were ever

keen to negotiate the dichotomies of writing and reading, of modernity and classicism (in music as much as in literature), of self and other in relation to an alienated political world.

On the other hand, Said and Barthes might appear to us now to be miles apart: the former deeply politicised, the latter highly suspicious of the hysterics of the ‘political’. At least half of Said’s books are concerned with Palestine and the Middle East; Barthes, by contrast, often appears as the disengaged, somewhat politically-cynical intellectual whose writing in his later career – when Said’s and Barthes’s paths might have, briefly, intersected between 1975 and 1980 – moved onto love, pleasure of the text, *pathos* and personal loss. Whereas Barthes seems to lose his radicalism, Said thwarts the common sense view that one becomes less radical in older age. (For example, there is no mention by Barthes of Frantz Fanon, whereas Said, in later work, moves to read Fanon *via* Lukács.⁶) Indeed, even the charge of neo-orientalism has been levelled against Barthes, especially in the encounter with Japan in his 1970 text *L’Empire des signes*, and critics even point to the fact that Barthes once acted in a student production of *The Persians*, an ancient Greek play considered by Said to be the first ‘orientalist’ text.⁷ Rare, it would seem, are the voices keen to reject this charge of neo-orientalism against Barthes.⁸

Of course, there is always a danger of parachuting in on someone’s *oeuvre* – especially well-known writers who tend to be pigeonholed (the ‘anti-Orientalist’ Said, the ‘late’ Barthes⁹). Yet, we seem, in this day and age at least, to value change, inconsistency, openness and suppleness of thought, over rigid, closed, dogmatic, systematicity. And yet, both Said and Barthes are systematic thinkers: the positing of structures in order to subvert them may appear anti-systematic (and in many ways it is), but it is trademark

Barthes; similarly, displacement and anti-authority may be crucial concerns throughout Said's work, but History and Politics (in its most acute form in the Middle East, down to the *Narja* of 1947-1948) are immutable, non-analogisable facts. Said is, of course, accused of both being Palestino-centric, and then also far too general in his work; by the same token Barthes's writing on fashion is dreary and methodical, on Balzac too elliptical and contradictory. One gets the feeling then that this is the point with Said and Barthes: their supple dialectics (not a fashionable word these days) are themselves groundable, recuperable (usually into intellectual fads, structuralism this, post-colonialism that, etc.); and yet all we have of them is their writings, in their nudity and their pastichability.

Hence Vico for both Said and Barthes as an important dialectician, theorising and deploying the spiral as a figure of both change and stasis, a Vico read through Marx (via an unmistakeable neo-Hegelianism); for Barthes, through the nineteenth-century historian Jules Michelet (a translator and scholar of Vico), and for Said Eric Auerbach. Of course, typically, both Michelet and Auerbach are hardly two figures of the avant-garde; yet, Barthes uses Michelet, especially in the 1950s, to play out important historiographical discussions – on analogy, on formalism, on sociology, ethnography – often within a Western Marxist voluntarism; for Said, Auerbach, and Spitzer are able, and seem to be the last intellectual generation able, to blend History with Literature without the one destroying the other.

Indeed, Said certainly seemed to take on much of the originality/repetition dialectic that Barthes and other structuralists developed.¹⁰ Said borrows Barthes's idea that, first, for a beginning in his work, one must reveal (hidden or innocented) structures, whilst insisting that 'there is no precursive model to follow' and that, at the same time, history 'is an

order of repetition, not of spontaneous and perpetual originality'.¹¹ Such concerns go to the heart of Barthes's work on Racine (as we shall see), on fashion and clothes history, even on Balzac. Indeed, it would be possible to argue that Barthes's radical re-reading and re-writing of *Sarrasine* in *S/Z*, is, *pace* the view of hardcore Structuralists, a deeply historical text, albeit in 'spiral'.

Vico was at the heart, by turn, of Said's humanism, according to WJT Mitchell,¹² with Vico's 'strange lineage of the sacred/secular distinction' being an important explanation of Saidian 'bafflement', including Said's trademark 'uncertainty, paradox, irresolution'; equivalents in Barthes being provisionality, displacement. It was not just Vico who returned in Barthes's and Said's spirals; other essayists were read and applied in common. Despite their common suspicion of inheritance (Barthes wrote of a 'refusal to inherit', Said of 'traditionless texts'¹³), important common influences were evident: Sartre but also Merleau-Ponty¹⁴, and Nietzsche.¹⁵ It would not therefore be difficult to find similar approaches and themes. Said's famous literary idea of contrapuntality is strongly linked to the use of antithesis that Barthesian semiotics inspired. Indeed, there is one key element of the Saidian critical spirit – 'when one begins to write today one is necessarily more of an autodidact', such is (suggests Said quoting Barthes) the 'deformation' in literature that criticism must come up against¹⁶ – that could be linked neatly to Barthes's adoption of Levi-Strauss's 'bricolage', for which essayism, the essay is the ideal vehicle.¹⁷

Yet, despite this converging path, important differences must be signalled. Even when Barthes considered Joseph Conrad (the subject of Said's doctoral thesis), the interest was not in exile and self (as with Said); and Barthes made no attempt to go beyond the choice

of language question.¹⁸ Their respective approaches to academia were divergent too. Said favoured a humanist, tolerant method that rejected separatism in academic relations: the academic should not be ‘the potentate ruling territory’ but ‘the figure of the traveller traversing it’¹⁹; whereas, for Barthes, the seminar was an experimental space, and in the case of the *Sarrasine* seminars (admittedly written and delivered across the dramatic events of May 1968), the seminar is treated as a space for political and ideological contestation. These are not exactly diametric opposites, but suggest an ethos (and even an epoch) radically different. Barthes’s ethos is (ironically) politicised and Said’s is (in one sense) ‘separatist’ – compartmentalising his teaching away from his politics. And so, though both saw university teaching as ‘utopian’, their utopias were very different: for Barthes, it was occupying a ‘marginal space’, for Said ‘a larger and more unified whole’.²⁰

There is then, within this *chassé-croisé*, an important literary-political debate. Both Said and Barthes, I want to argue here, can be located firmly within the traditions of Western Marxism (Lukács, Gramsci, Sartre), with important additions of Sidney Hook and then Trotsky by Barthes. Keen to ‘marxianise’ Sartrian thought (for which Brecht will play a crucial role), Barthes was of a generation older than Said’s. Our parametric approach may allow us then to consider a delayed but important debate which goes across the pre-War and post-War generations that the two critics represent. The first Barthes/Said nexus might be best described with a debate between Lukács versus Trotsky – and not Adorno, whom Barthes never mentioned, or even read it seems – rumbling in the background.

Nexus 1: Lukács and Trotsky?

Whereas Lukácsian thought sees artistic decadence after 1848, Trotskyan literary theory proposes a ‘longue durée’ explanation of culture as it grows under emergent capitalism; but it also puts forward, against a Lukácsian search for ideology, the strong argument that the judging of literature (or art in general) must be done so by literature and art itself.²¹

This will allow Barthes, as we shall see, to engage ‘form’ in a way that Lukácsian formalism might not.²² This is not to say that Barthes’s work on Balzac for instance (the arch Lukácsian reference point) was ‘anti-Lukácsian’; but much Barthesian literary theory was keen to get beyond ideologism (in which camp we might put Said’s *Orientalism*), or at least the danger of reducing phenomena to ideology.

In a famous conclusion to his 1957 analysis of myth, ‘Myth Today’²³, though walking a tight line between Lukácsian and Zhdanovian positions, Barthes was sure of the limits of ideological critique:

[T]he mythologist [...] constantly runs the risk of causing reality which he purports to protect, to disappear; [...] the mythologist is condemned to metalanguage. This exclusion [...] is called ideologism. Zhdanovism has roundly condemned it (without proving, incidentally, that it was, *for the time being*, avoidable), in the early Lukács, [...] and Goldmann. (158)

Ideologism, argued Barthes, resolved alienated reality only by an ‘amputation’, not by a dialectical synthesis, and hence a dilemma for the critical thinker. In an implicit

comparison with Lucien Goldmann's work on seventeenth-century thought, *The Hidden God*, Barthes chose wine and Blaise Pascal as his examples:

The mythologist gets out of this [ideologistic aporia] the best he can: he deals with the goodness of wine, not with the wine itself, just as the historian deals with Pascal's ideology, not with the *Pensées* in themselves. (ibid)²⁴

In the debates over Said's *Orientalism* a similar critique has been made. Having suggested (using a quote from Barthes) that in language all 'representations [...] are deformations', Said was criticised by Homi Bhabha for running the risk of considering Orientalism as a misrepresentation of Oriental essence, something Said had earlier rejected.²⁵ We will see the importance of ideologism to Said in a moment when we consider the influence of Goldmann and Lukácsianism on his critical work.

Importantly, for Barthes, critical practice needed to overcome then the history-versus-literature dilemma; he wrote in his 1959 summary of new critical tendencies in France for the Belgrade newspaper *Politica*:

[E]ither it is history, but then the work, literature evaporate, become a pure ideological reflection without qualification; or it is the Author, but then it is the powerful reality of the historical world that is bracketed out. (*Oeuvres Complètes* vol I, p. 816)

One solution for Barthes of finding a way between ideologism and realism was to consider a literary text both historically and structurally, to fill in with an analysis of literary language which Marxist literary criticism found ‘mysterious’; this then allowed Barthes to practise a critical essayism that was not ‘discovering’ the work but (as he wrote in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1963²⁶) ‘covering’ the text with the critic’s language, and, following Bakhtin, that saw literary criticism as ‘dialogic’, ‘parametric’, with text.

Unfortunately, our parametric approach is skewed by the fact that Barthes had seemingly no knowledge of Said’s work – *Orientalism* being swiftly translated into French in 1980 and prefaced by one-time collaborator of Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, only to be ignored in France until the relaunch of the translation in 1997. But Said was an avid reader of Barthes, and his judgments largely positive. He suggested that, with the growth of jargon and esoteric language in criticism, that no-one would agree today with Barthes that the system of a special language often slips towards ‘a kind of reductionism and disapproval’; thus criticism became, in the 1980s, inward, introverted, no longer connected to the political, and, Said suggested, people did not read Barthes properly; yet he seemed to blame Barthes (and Derrida) for making literary criticism break up into ‘narrower niches’.²⁷

This ambivalence towards Barthes went further. Already in *Beginnings* Said was taking on parametrism, a distinctly non-Anglophone critical idea in which ‘it is wrong to pretend that there is a single notion of text’; and, he suggested following Barthes, ‘to begin to write is to begin to produce a text’, though, Said added modestly, ‘writing can go through a very large number of refinements before it is a text, at least to its author’; for the ‘I am

literature' claim that Barthes made for literary criticism in 1966, Said argued, was part of the desire to 'abolish the distinction between art and criticism'; and yet, as we shall see, Said ignored the consequences of this distinction, preferring to reiterate Barthes's view that the ends of any critic's job was to find 'silence'.²⁸ Said appreciated also Barthes's functionalism, suggesting that one aim of functionalism 'is to perfect the instrument of analysis as much as any understanding of a text's workings'; and so an 'intelligent' critic such as Barthes 'will have the good taste to know the qualitative difference between Ian Fleming and Balzac, what he actually says is that the latter *works* better (is more responsive to a full-scale semiological reading by Barthes) than the former.' Said defended Barthes now though: 'it is almost the same as saying that you can write a good story if you know the rules of composition, which obviously guarantees no such result', and fearing that this could lead to 'unvarying claustrophobia', 'self-sealing and self-perpetuating', and 'exclusive and rigidly systematic', producing only readings confirmed by initial definitions, Said now began to appreciate Barthesian method: 'you experience the text making the critic work, and the critic in turn shows the text at work [...] Critical ingenuity is pretty much confined to transposing the work into an instance of method.' Barthes is then considered as one of a number of critics (Genette, Auerbach, Spitzer, Benjamin) who are 'incorporative', converting what seems to be 'alien' material, even quixotic and trivial material, into pertinent dimensions of the text'.²⁹

Said seemed then to take a particular line on Barthes's work. In 'Roads Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism', he pointed out that Barthes's '*activité structuraliste*' and '*écriture*' (in *Writing Degree Zero*) were helping to decentre the classics; Barthes was revealing a 'defused' author in Racine, an 'omnicompetent text' in *S/Z*, and a text as

a sensation in *Pleasure of the Text*; and this Barthesian critical theory represented for him the shift from ‘objectivized historicism’, with English or French studies at its centre, to a kind of international critical apparatus important for its activity.³⁰ Interestingly, in his important broadside against structuralism and post-structuralism, ‘Criticism between Culture and System’³¹, in which Said moved away from Piaget’s structuralism and followed Jacques Derrida in breaking through structures³², there is no mention at all of Barthes; and yet Barthes’s 1957 work on fashion (admittedly only recently translated³³), as well as his early 1960s study of Racine, were full of this type of analysis.

Nexus 2: Barthes – (Goldmann) – Said: the Literary

We must reckon as if there were no books in the world.

Vico³⁴

In their literary analysis a few fundamentals are evident in Said’s and Barthes’s work. Firstly, just as character was inevitable for Barthes (and even when it does not exist, as in Philippe Sollers’s 1965 novel *Drame*, language becomes a ‘character’), so geography in the novel was crucial for Said: ‘You can’t have a novel without a setting’.³⁵ Also common to both is a ‘spirit’ of literature. Just as Said insisted that TS Eliot *is* relevant, so Barthes re-read the French classics, across a period where Maoism was extolling ‘proletarian culture’ and promoting the destruction of bourgeois culture; here, Barthes (and to a lesser extent, Said) moved against the post-68 radical flow, refusing to toe the Maoist critique of bourgeois culture that the radical journal *Tel Quel* advocated in the

wake of May 68. Thus Said and Barthes both worked equally on classical and modern texts, and were happy to stray outside the literary culture of their mother tongue (Said on Renan, Camus; Barthes on Loyola, Brecht, Goethe, etc.).³⁶ And so, in their critical praxis, Barthes and Said could both call for a radical ‘suspension’ of judgment.³⁷

One important meeting point of Said and Barthes, as suggested earlier, was around the work of the sociologist of culture and Lukács specialist, Lucien Goldmann. Interestingly, Said was critical of the manner in which Goldmann’s literary theory had emptied much that was ‘insurrectionary’ in Lukács’s theory; though in his 1966 review of Goldmann’s *The Hidden God*, Goldmann, a Rumanian émigré based in Paris, having translated two pieces by Lukács into French, was, in 1966 at least, according to Said, the only Lukácsian in Europe.³⁸

Not much has been written on Barthes and Goldmann, surprisingly given that they were friends and colleagues at the VIth section of the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes* in Paris, up until Goldmann’s death in 1970. Goldmann published in the 1950s in two journals for which Barthes was an important member of the editorial team (the radical popular-theatre journal *Théâtre Populaire* and the New Left ‘bulletin’ *Arguments*). Apart from a spat in the aftermath of May 68, in the pages of *L’Express*, theirs was, it seems, a mutually-respectful relationship.

There are also important parallels in their early work. Barthes’s first book, *Writing Degree Zero*, published in 1953 and written between 1947 and 1952, introduced his trademark word ‘écriture’ [writing], which highlighted the historical, class and social manner in which language was deployed by writers in order to signify literature; Goldmann had written, for his part in 1947, that ‘*sociological analysis* does not exhaust a

work of art and sometimes does not manage to get near it even, the essential being to find the route through which historical and social reality expresses itself *across the individual sensibility of its creator*'.³⁹ Barthes's important 1953 piece, 'The World-Object', displayed a highly Goldmannian analysis of class vision/outlook, which, in turn, Goldmann had borrowed from the early Lukács.⁴⁰ Barthes here and Goldmann in *The Hidden God* pointed to the way in which seventeenth-century philosophers (for Goldmann) and the Dutch Masters of the same century (for Barthes) were unable to get beyond the bourgeois ideology of their masters. Also, as Mitchell Cohen points out⁴¹, Goldmann's Kantian Hegelianism is premised upon refusing the 'fact / value dichotomy', a crucial element for Barthes, especially in *S/Z*, though he traced this fact / value 'collapse' back to Nietzsche not Kant.

Though taking on board the value of much of Goldmann's theories – in relation to dialectics in 'Myth Today', on tragedy in relation to George Thomson's potentially crude sociologism in his explanations of ancient tragedy's 'turn' into poetry, – Barthes nevertheless moved onto three distinct terrains; firstly, that of the bracketing of the author. Whereas Goldmann in 1965 stepped back, in the face of criticism, partially retracting the idea that a creative act was a social one rather than an individual one (part of the 'trans-individual' that accepted the importance of structures but not humans as functions of structures⁴²), Barthes in the mid-sixties merely pressed ahead with the idea (which seemed to have originated in his early work on Michelet) that the author, authority, in a text should be dissolved, famously proclaiming in 1968 that we should act as if there were a 'Death of the Author'. Neither Goldmann nor Said were prepared to take this step.⁴³

Secondly, Barthes's *On Racine*, and especially the final section 'History or Literature?' questioned, as with Thomson, any simple or direct link between history and form.⁴⁴ In parallel with his work on fashion – a cultural phenomenon that Barthes increasingly seemed to equate with Literature in the 1960s –, *On Racine* represented a direct, though only implicit, dialogue with, and critique of, *The Hidden God*. This is not to say that Barthes began to ignore Goldmann's work. Though hinting that Goldmann's method in *The Hidden God* was a 'disguised determinism'⁴⁵, Barthes saw Goldmann's new work on the novel as dialectical, making a link between 'the economic structure and the aesthetic structure' and seeing the novel form as corresponding with the bourgeoisie's development but not as an expression of its collective consciousness; and Barthes imagined how Goldmann's 'semantic' (or ideological) critique and his own semiological critique (or 'sociologics' of form) might be complementary (hence the 'two sociologies' in the title of Barthes's book review⁴⁶), implying in his final question that the latter may be more open to the former than the other way round...

Goldmann returned to the debate in the late 1960s, and rejected (in a manner not dissimilar to criticism made against Said) Barthes's speculative essayism on Racinian theatre.⁴⁷ It was however Barthes, of course, not Goldmann, who was singled out by the arch-conservative Raymond Picard.⁴⁸ Though Said reviewed enthusiastically *The Hidden God* in the English translation that appeared the same year as the Picard-Barthes joust, Said did not pursue the literary analysis of Racine in Barthes's own work.

In his review of *The Hidden God* Said underlined the usefulness for literary criticism of establishing a (contradictory) 'world vision' (Piaget's idea according to Said), as it allowed us to see a writer's life as a 'dynamic polity' producing a 'historical meaning'.

Said considered that Goldmann had united Marxism and the social sciences, Marx and Piaget, with no equivalent in English, bringing together ‘Gallic precision’ with Germanic ‘intuitionism, Weberian ideal typology and metaphysical speculation’: Goldmann was, wrote Said a decade before *Orientalism*, ‘concerned with studying the historical appearances or incarnations of certain structures of mind’; Said saw value also in Goldmann’s ‘interpretative circle’, ‘when man faces and is faced by, interprets, and is interpreted by, his works’.⁴⁹ Clearly, *The Hidden God* contained much that would enthuse and infuse Said’s career. However, one minor criticism of Goldmann may be a key to differences between Said and Barthes.

The English translation of *The Hidden God*, Said pointed out, showed that Goldmann was not a ‘gifted stylist’, his ideas leading to a bit of a ‘scrappy affair’.⁵⁰ Here was a key departure point for Barthes: the third and final way in which Barthes moved beyond Goldmann’s sociology of literature was in his attitude to literary form; and though Goldmann wrote on form in Lukácsian ways, it had none of the Bachelard nor the Lacan that Barthes slowly but surely imported into his work via language.⁵¹

Here is the essayism I wish to discuss in relation to Said. In *On Racine*, Barthes made broadsides against academic ‘explication de texte’ [commentaries] which merely looked for the signified out of a large number of signifiers.⁵² The key question for Barthes, by contrast, was: how could his reading avoid a ‘naturalisation’ of Racinian theatre, to become an (early example of a) rewriting, a re-poeticising, of Racine for the modern era? Indeed, despite a hidden dislike for Racinian theatre, Barthes was noble enough to insist that Racine’s *oeuvre* was both a sign of history and a resistance to it: if we want to put Racinian theatre on the modern stage, we have to ‘distance’ it from ourselves, perhaps in

this essayistic fashion; and Goldmann's Marxist, as well as Mauro's psychanalytical, approaches were found to be wanting in terms of their view of what an *oeuvre*, creativity, actually is.⁵³

This is despite the fact that Goldmann was acutely aware of Lukács' skill as essayist. In a manner which would echo in Said's critical 'worldiness', Goldmann insisted that Lukácsian essayism was distinct from philosophy in that, asking questions rather than providing answers, the essay-form in Lukács' hands needed contact, not with abstract and autonomous ideas, but with 'concrete reality'; as Lukács put it: 'Every Essay puts, in golden letters, next to its title: in relation to...'; the essay is itself then a form, 'which speaks more of the work of art than of real life' because it allows 'the big human questions (of destiny, love, duty) to be expressed in a form that has no need of the worn-out forms which works of art take', a proposition not unnoticed by Said.⁵⁴

Nexus 3: (Dis)Engagement and Essayism ?

The man interested in these disciplines [psychology, socialist moral or religion in the novel] will read essays and risk less.

Alain Robbe-Grillet⁵⁵

The major difference between Said and Barthes then becomes the manner in which they conceive their essayistic writing. For Said, as for Noam Chomsky, there was a need for compartmentalisation: it is not possible to consider Said's literary and cultural criticism in the same way as one might look at his writing on Palestine, on political oppression,

even on media.⁵⁶ (*Orientalism* is as close as Said's cultural theory comes to political critique; indeed the *political* conclusions that one could make with *Orientalism* are basically untenable, even utopian: in this sense both *Mythologies* and *Orientalism* are brilliantly unhelpful.) With Barthes, no such compartmentalisation: essayism *is* political critique; to write intransitively questions radically the utilitarianism that the Institution imposes upon cultural criticism. One may write in order to be 'liked', as Barthes suggested in later years; but one writes also in order to subvert. There are elements of this essayistic innovation in Said, but, compared to Barthes, ultimately Said is looking for, if not hard, then certainly fixed or fixable positions or 'limits'⁵⁷; for Barthes, it is the search for the slippery, for the provisional.

This is not to say that Said's writing lacks skill. His last work, on 'Late Style', has much that is essayistic: tentative, suggestive, wide-ranging, provisional.⁵⁸ Having praised Barthes's essays alongside photographs⁵⁹, Said even tried his hand at a bit of photo-essayism, describing *After The Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* as neither a 'consecutive story' nor a 'political essay', but 'unconventional, hybrid, and fragmentary'.⁶⁰ Indeed, if we define this sub-genre as one concerned with the photographic medium and its interactions with text, *After The Last Sky* contains brief but impressive glimpses of photo-essayism.⁶¹ Interestingly, the manner in which Said characterised the Palestinian people in this photo-essay – 'dispossessed', 'dispersed', 'dislocated', 'intermittent', 'discontinuous', 'de-centred', 'exiled' – was not only a description of the Palestinian condition, but also hinted at a Foucauldian, post-structuralist notion of power, in that Said seemed to be suggesting that dispossession and dispersion were *part of* the 'incommensurate power' (and, we might add, for which the essay becomes a highly

appropriate form); and, for Said, anti-essentialism and exilic narrative were a deeply political, philosophical stance deployed to ‘dispel any notion that Palestinians are a sort of essentialized paradigm of permanent homelessness and terror’.⁶²

Exilic thought is also deeply essayistic, and has a central place in Barthes’s writing – evident in the key Barthesian figures of ‘drift’, ‘displacement’, ‘loss’, ‘ex-nomination’, ‘silence’, ‘exemption of meaning’. But, for Said, in his (essayistically brilliant) piece ‘Mind of Winter: Reflections on Exile’, exile is not some desired state (the Palestinians have been ‘exiled by exiles’), though a ‘counterpoint’ is often generated by it.⁶³ Said is thus far more dialectical about ‘exile’ than Barthes; Barthes’s essayistic strategy is perhaps too blind to, or dismissive of, ideologicistic critique.

This may be linked to the essayistic route that Said, ultimately, refuses to take in his writing (with the exceptions mentioned). Even though Barthes *et al* questioned, according to Said, the humanism of origins – showing that literature, psychology and all human sciences are ‘too well independent’ and beyond ‘direct and constant human intervention’ – Said was perhaps too quick to glide over Barthes’s essayistic humanism.⁶⁴

Conclusion

In all great criticism one finds the vision of a New State, and yet not a brick laid towards directly building it.

John Berger⁶⁵

According to Hayden White (a translator of Goldmann furthermore), Said’s attempt in his ‘meditative essays’ *Beginnings* to eschew both ‘a logic of consecutiveness’ and ‘random

analogy' was part of the essayist's will, and which allowed him to avoid the criticism of logical inconsistency and nihilism; however, White insisted, though 'closing the gap between creative and critical literature, Said maintained a notion of the differences between metacritical and critical literature': major discrepancies between Said and Barthes thus emerge: a 'mythifying' of writing (that Barthes performs), versus the displacing of previous writings by Said.⁶⁶ Though Said's 'adjacency', 'radical discontinuity', 'construction', and 'anti-dynastics' sound so Barthesian in spirit, they are not applied to Said's own writing in the same way as he might apply them to literary texts. Indeed, the key to the major difference between Said's and Barthes's approaches comes in the conclusion to 'The World, the Text and the Critic'.⁶⁷

Having suggested the complexity of 'performance' meeting the 'worldly' critic, Said then spends much of his essay discussing critical practice (in a heady mix of Ricoeur, Fanon, Frye, biblical and Koranic exegesis, Marx, and Foucault, with Conrad, Hardy, Joyce, George Eliot, Wilde), only to conclude rhetorically (though this is possibly the essayist's own 'false' performance of the essay): 'But where in all this is the critic and criticism?'. Thus follows a brilliant, if brief, discussion of the essay.⁶⁸ As close as Said gets to 'creative criticism' – though never specifically mentioning this 'tradition' beyond the perceptive comments of Lukács and Wilde – he stops short at a general analysis. In a sense, this is totally understandable: the orphic nature of the creative essay – once you look at it, define it, delimit it, you lose it (as Barthes pointed out in *Writing Degree Zero*) – may have dissuaded Said from taking the next step, that of being himself this 'creative critic'. This rubicon that Barthes crossed, certainly from *S/Z* of the late 1960s onwards and into the 'Romanesque' period of the 1970s, is the deliberate rewriting of academic

seminar notes, of scholarly prefaces, of lecture notes, and the playful parodies and pastiches of ‘regular’ journalistic criticism, to make a new *oeuvre*. Said’s excursus on the essay describes the text as a ‘system of forces institutionalized by the reigning culture’, but not of the institutionalised position of the essayist that allows for the essay to escape (only temporarily, I am afraid) the institution precisely by its ‘ironic’ (to borrow Said’s term) relationship to the intellectual and scholarly institution in which Barthes became a key player. Ironically then, it is here *Barthes* the worldly critic (in that he attempts to step outside the academy), and *Said*, the diligent, obedient, closed-in critic whose rigid division of university and world blocks the ‘creative criticism’ route.

As Joseph N. Riddel points out, criticism is seen by Said as an ‘external’ form of molestation, and yet is shown by Barthes’s *S/Z* to be present in the textuality of fiction; ‘but’, argues Riddel, ‘Said is really not concerned with documenting a history of texts that re-write other texts’.⁶⁹ Yet (as Riddell quotes), Said shows how mimesis revolves into parody and ‘innovation to rewriting’: ‘Each novel recapitulates not life but other novels’; and: ‘A text is in part a continuing desire to write one’.⁷⁰ Yet, in his famous 1976 *Diacritics* interview, Said seemed reluctant to allow ‘avant-garde’ criticism the creative option, merely allowing a slightly ambiguous term to emerge: ‘recreative’.⁷¹ Thus Said, (generally) unlike Barthes, runs the risk, as with so many (left) critics of literature, of ‘missing’ the text, of instrumentalising literature, creative writing, of turning a text into document – there is a big debate in Francophone literary studies at the moment, whereby much hitherto scholarship in this area has taken iconic novels outside of the Hexagonal mainstream and used them as ethnographies of those (former) French colonies in revolt

against French culture and ‘identity’, a word that invites emblematicity, in a denial or enslavement of literariness, for an affirmation of cultural difference and/or revolt).

Here then is the Trotskyan approach that, I suggested (perhaps surprisingly), Barthes adopts and then (in typical Barthesian fashion) takes to its bitter conclusion: if literature must be judged by the laws of literature alone, then Barthes will, in his literary criticism and in his writing in general, produce another literature, his own essay, as the only viable approach to a literary (or any other kind of) text.

The trouble is with my argument is where does literature, the literary, literary (and by contiguity, cultural) criticism end? Do we suddenly sit up from our Balzac, Jane Austen, Albert Camus, Mohammed Dib, and declare the existence of a non-literary, political world? (Barthes appears aware of this in his (‘orientalist’) piece on Hippies in Morocco in 1969.⁷²) There is a sense in which, once a systematics of literary criticism is (rightfully) abandoned, literary criticism, once analysed through the optic of the essay and through essayism, can become a literature in itself: the essay is itself parametric to the deforming of literature, as it too ‘deforms’ (in Barthes’s hands at least), in a way that Said was perhaps not able to accept. A scientific critique of history and society, though recognising and using the tiny holes that seep interesting literary ideas into political critique, can then rightly be operated; this is in spatial terms rather than in a chronological order of tasks, but for which the corrosive nature of literature (including our essayistic widening of this term) can play a salutary role.

One might rightly say ‘so what?’ given the plight of (for example) Palestine today, – and indeed there is something deeply ‘literary’ about the ‘late’ Barthes –, but that would not be a new criticism of the literary. Indeed, Said himself is quite forthright in this direction,

suggesting it is ‘quite undialectical’ to make ‘a literary or intellectual project immediately into a political one’, quite conscious as he is of the individualist/collaborative nature of criticism, citing Barthes as suggesting that, ideally, semiotics should be ‘cooperative and impersonal’. But Barthes’s constantly moved on from the seminar room co-operation (say, looking at *Sarrasine*) to turn then (but usually with gestures towards his students’ input) to ‘essayise’ this work (for example, from the *Sarrasine* notes to *S/Z*); and that is also the point, and Said, ironically for a Vicoist aware of spirals, possibly misses this in overstating how much that Barthes ‘quite deliberately frees himself of [his] past attachments and habits and alliances’.⁷³ Barthes is on the verge of being a writer, Said, alas, is a brilliant critic.

¹ Said’s Palestinian-Christian roots are well-known; less is the fact that Barthes’s maternal grandfather, Louis Binger, an explorer of the 1880s, gave his name to Bingerville in the Ivory Coast.

² A. Hargreaves, ‘A Neglected Precursor: Roland Barthes and the Origins of Postcolonialism’, in H. Adlai Murdoch and Anne Donadey eds, *Postcolonial Theory and Francophone Literary Studies* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), pp. 55-64.

³ See Barthes’s comments on May 1968 in the lectures before his death in 1980, *La Préparation du roman* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), p. 362.

⁴ Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments* [1977] (trans. R. Howard, London: Cape, 1979), pp. 232-4

⁵ A. Mifti, ‘Global Comparativism’ in H. Bhabha and W.J.T. Mitchell, *Edward Said. Continuing the Conversation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), p. 123.

⁶ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 326.

⁷ D. Knight, *Barthes and Orientalism. Space, Travel, Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 92.

⁸ Lynn Higgins sees Barthes escaping the Saidian dichotomy of either not speaking, or denying subjectivity, by ‘writing without representing’; ‘Barthes’s Imaginary Voyages’, *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* 5:2 (1981), republished in P. Williams, *Edward Said* (London: Sage, 2001), vol. II, pp. 153-4 (henceforth Sage vol. I, vol. II); and Charles Forsdick suggests that Barthes’s book on Japan is potentially more concerned ‘with decente[ring] and destabili[zing] “home”’ than with ‘illuminat[ing] “elsewhere”’, and is tightly linked to its immediate post-68 moment in what Forsdick calls (rather litotically) ‘the ideological uncertainties of the times’; C. Forsdick, *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Cultures. The Persistence of Diversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 137-41 (p. 139).

⁹ See Barthes’s political and cultural ‘engagement’ in 1954-1956, including journalism and popular theatre, especially in relation to the Algerian War and Brechtian theatre, in A. Stafford, *Roland Barthes, Phenomenon and Myth. An Intellectual Biography* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), chapter 1.

¹⁰ Said, ‘On Repetition’ and ‘On Originality’, in *The World, The Text and The Critic* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), pp. 111-39 (henceforth WTC).

¹¹ Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1975), pp. 16-17, p. 354.

¹² ‘Secular Divination: Edward Said’s Humanism’, in Bhabha/Mitchell eds, *Edward Said. Continuing the Conversation*, pp. 99-108 (p. 107).

¹³ See Barthes, 'I do not believe in influences', *Oeuvres Complètes* vol. I, pp. 1450-2; references to Barthes's *Complete Works* are made to the first edition in three volumes (Paris: Seuil, 1993-1995), and translations of extracts are my own. Said, *Beginnings* p. 162, p. 188.

¹⁴ Said, 'Labyrinth of Incarnations' in *Reflections on Exile. And Other Cultural and Literary Essays* (London: Granta, 2001), pp. 1-14; Barthes, *La Préparation du roman*, p. 177, which describes Merleau-Ponty's influence on his fashion work.

¹⁵ Said, 'Conrad and Nietzsche' in *Reflections on Exile*, pp. 70-82.

¹⁶ *Beginnings*, p. 8.

¹⁷ In parallel with Said's impressive musical career, Barthes was an accomplished amateur pianist, and he also, like Said, allowed music an influence in the structuring of texts, for example in *S/Z*; Said's example is *Culture and Imperialism* (see the 1993 interview with Said in *boundary 2* 20:1, republished in Sage vol. I, p. 153).

¹⁸ See Barthes's reply to a 1957 questionnaire on why Conrad chose to write in English, *Oeuvres Complètes* vol. I, p. 757.

¹⁹ See the *boundary 2* interview, in Sage vol. I, pp. 157-8.

²⁰ See Said's comments, republished in Sage vol. I, p. 157; Knight, *Barthes and Orientalism*, p. 168.

²¹ 'A work of art should, in the first place, be judged by its own law, that is, by the law of art', wrote Trotsky in 1924; see 'The Formalist School of Art and Marxism' in L. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (London: Redwords, 1991), p. 207.

²² Both Goldmann and Said rejected (the former explicitly, the other implicitly) the humanism and realism that led Lukács to denigrate modernism; it is clear where Barthes,

France's foremost Brechtian in the 1950s, would have stood in the Lukács-Brecht debate, which appears in English in R. Taylor ed, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: NLB, 1977).

²³ 'Myth Today', post-face to *Mythologies* (trans. Annette Lavers, London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 109-59.

²⁴ Goldmann, *The Hidden God. A Study of Tragic Vision in the 'Pensées' of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine* [1955] (trans. Philip Thody, New York/London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964).

²⁵ Said, *Orientalism* (New York/London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 273; Homi Bhabha 'Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism' in F. Barker *et al*, *The Politics of Theory* (Colchester: University of Essex, 1983), republished in Sage vol. III, p. 396.

²⁶ Barthes, 'Réponse à une enquête sur le structuralisme' [1965], *Œuvres Complètes* vol. I, p. 1534 ; 'What is Criticism?' [1963], in *Critical Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), p. 259.

²⁷ Said, 'Opponents, Audiences, Constituencies and Community', in *Reflections on Exile*, pp. 122-3.

²⁸ Said, *Beginnings*, p. 195, p. 202, p. 328; Barthes, *Criticism and Truth* (trans. K. Keunemann, London: Athlone Press, 1987), p. 170.

²⁹ Said, *Beginnings*, pp. 145-7.

³⁰ Republished in WTC, pp. 142-3.

³¹ Republished in WTC, pp. 178-225.

³² *Beginnings*, pp. 191-4, pp. 339-43.

³³ See 'History and Sociology of Clothing. Some Methodological Considerations', in Barthes, *The Language of Fashion* (trans. Andy Stafford, Oxford: Berg/Sydney: Power Publications, 2006), pp. 3-20.

³⁴ Vico cited in Said, *Beginnings*, p. 203.

³⁵ Barthes, 'Drame, poème, roman' in Tel Quel, *Théorie d'ensemble* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), pp. 27-42; Said interview in *boundary 2* republished in Sage vol. I, p. 160.

³⁶ Indeed, why not compare the parallels between Said's work on Milton, Swift, Austen or Dickens with that by Barthes on Racine, Sade, Fourier, or Balzac? Or the former on Conrad, Hardy, Hopkins, Kipling, Yeats, TE Lawrence, Forster, TS Eliot, Rushdie and Guha, with the latter on Flaubert, Mallarmé, Loti, Gide, Sollers, and Khatibi? The historical parallels alone are striking enough.

³⁷ Sage vol. I, p. 166; Barthes, *S/Z. An Essay* (trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 217.

³⁸ Said, 'Travelling Theory' in WTC, pp. 234-5; and 'A Sociology of Mind', in *Partisan Review* 33 (summer 1966), pp. 444-8. It is ironic that Said saw Goldmann as abandoning the early, radical Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*, for Goldmann's theories were expressly dependent on this early Lukács, and Goldmann's differences with Lukács were based on the former's rejection of the later Lukács who renounced *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács was barely known in English until 1957, and Goldmann's *The Hidden God* was 'influential' in disseminating Lukács in Western Europe; see J Rees, *The Algebra of Revolution. The Dialectic and the Classical Marxist Tradition* (New York/London: Routledge, 1998), p. 258n116.

³⁹ ‘Matérialisme dialectique et histoire de la littérature’ [1947], in Goldmann, *Recherches dialectiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 62 (my translation, emphasis in original).

⁴⁰ Republished in Barthes, *Critical Essays*, pp. 3-12.

⁴¹ Mitchell Cohen, *The Wager of Lucien Goldmann* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 74.

⁴² See the preface to the second edition of Goldmann, *Towards a Sociology of the Novel* (trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Tavistock Publications, 1975), p. ix; Cohen, *The Wager of Lucien Goldmann*, p. 244.

⁴³ In *Pour une sociologie du procès littéraire. De Goldmann à Barthes en passant par Bakhtine* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001), Gérard Fabre uses Goldmannian sociology to shoe-horn Barthesian essayism into a technology of reading (rather than a rewriting of text), which merely confirms the main point that I am making about Barthes’s essayism in opposition to Said’s and Goldmann’s critical theory.

⁴⁴ See A. Stafford, ‘Clothes, Fashion and System in the Writings of Roland Barthes: “Something out of Nothing”’, post-face to Barthes, *The Language of Fashion*, pp. 144-5.

⁴⁵ See the two interviews given by Barthes to *Tel Quel* in 1961 and 1963 respectively, ‘Literature Today’ and ‘Literature and Signification’, republished in *Critical Essays*, p. 153 and pp. 270-1.

⁴⁶ ‘Les deux sociologies du roman’, *Œuvres Complètes* vol. I, pp. 1147-9.

⁴⁷ In *Situation de la critique racinienne* (Paris: L’Arche, 1971), though praising aspects of Barthes’s reading in *On Racine*, Goldmann regretted that Barthes often ‘substitutes his own problems and perspectives for the literal and objective meaning of the text in question’ (p. 113).

⁴⁸ Said described how American departments played out the Barthes-Picard affair in the years following; see 'Reflections on American "Left" literary criticism', in WTC, p. 167; Barthes's reaction to the Picard affair was summarised in his famous 1966 comment: 'to be subversive, criticism does not need to judge, all it needs to do is talk about language', *Criticism and Truth*, p. 33.

⁴⁹ 'Sociology of the Mind', p. 446-8.

⁵⁰ 'Sociology of the Mind', p. 444.

⁵¹ Reviewing Goldmann's 1964 work on a sociology of the novel, Barthes suggested that for Goldmann form is what 'others would call content' (*Oeuvres Complètes* vol. I, p. 1147). Jacques Leenhardt, student of Goldmann's and author of a brilliant, early 'post-colonial' reading of Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1957 novel *Jealousy* (*Lecture politique du roman: la Jalousie d'Alain Robbe-Grillet*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1973) has made the same point, saying that Barthes offered an 'incentive to complete, to open up the work of analysis of texts carried out in the tradition of Lukács and Goldmann [...] to find a discourse in which to speak of writing itself from a sociological perspective'; Leenhardt cited in Steven Ungar, *Roland Barthes, The Professor of Desire* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 110.

⁵² Barthes, *On Racine* [1963] (trans. Richard Howard, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), p. 147n4.

⁵³ See *On Racine*, pp. 167-72, especially the final sentence (pp. 171-2).

⁵⁴ Goldmann, 'Georg Lukács: L'essayiste' [1950], republished in *Recherches dialectiques*, pp. 250-1; Said, 'The World, the Text, and the Critic', in WTC, p. 52.

⁵⁵ A. Robbe-Grillet, *For A New Novel* (trans. R. Howard, New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 35.

⁵⁶ Said even spoke of his 'two lives', though he was keen to show how Bloomian poetics (for example) could be useful in understanding the politics of power; 'Interview with Edward Said', in *Diacritics* 6:3 (1976), pp. 30-47, republished in Sage vol. I, pp. 12-13.

⁵⁷ Said preferred Foucault's 'vocabulary of limits' over Barthes's 'infinite possibility of language' in what he called Barthes's 'para-scientific treatises', in 'Eclecticism and Orthodoxy in Literature', *Diacritics* Spring 1972, pp.4-5, p. 8.

⁵⁸ 'Thoughts on Late Style', *London Review of Books*, 5 August 2004, pp. 3-7.

⁵⁹ Said spoke of Barthes's 'superb essay' on The Eiffel Tower and its 'neutral mental glee in the task' of analysing signs, *Beginnings*, p. 323.

⁶⁰ With photographs by Jean Mohr (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 6. On this photo-text, see M. Marrouchi, 'The Critic as Dis/Placed Intelligence: the Case of Edward Said', *Diacritics* 21:1 (1991), republished in Sage vol. I, pp. 63-77, and which treats Said's essayism in general; as does Patrick Williams, in relation to Adorno, in the introduction to Sage vol. I, pp. xii-xiii.

⁶¹ The commentary in *After The Last Sky* is skilful: the writing about the cover photograph, for example, avoids commonplace (pp. 128-9); the use of digression neatly relates form in one photograph to a Proustian encapsulation of an earlier Palestine (p. 47); the impressive contrapuntal 'silence' narrates the image of a virtually-empty UN meeting respecting Palestine (p. 123); finally, the moving encomium, as the essay finishes, on how Palestinians 'look' (in both senses of the word) in photography (pp. 160-6).

⁶² *After The Last Sky*, p. 162.

⁶³ Renamed as 'Reflections on Exile', in *Reflections on Exile*, p. 173, p. 178, p. 186.

⁶⁴ *Beginnings*, p. 374. Yet, in 'Eclecticism and Orthodoxy', Said regretted that the essay, with its 'special combination of force, personality, brevity, and reflectiveness', was being marginalized by the book (p. 2).

⁶⁵ Cited in G. Dyer, *Ways of Telling. The Work of John Berger* (London: Pluto, 1986), p. 32.

⁶⁶ H. White, 'Criticism as Cultural Politics', *Diacritics* 6:3 (1976), republished in Sage vol. III, pp. 364-6; Said, *Beginnings*, p. 363, p. 319, p. 66.

⁶⁷ WTC, pp. 50-3.

⁶⁸ For Said, the essay represented 'the act of cultural, even civilisational survival of the highest importance'; Said cited by B. Ashcroft and P. Ahluwalia in *Edward Said* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 36-8. Interestingly, no such claim is ever made by Barthes.

⁶⁹ J. Riddel, 'Scriptive Fate/Scriptive Hope', *Diacritics* 6:3 (1976), republished in Sage vol. III, pp. 380-1.

⁷⁰ *Beginnings*, p. 152, p. 202.

⁷¹ 'Interview with Edward Said', Sage vol. I, p. 4.

⁷² Barthes, 'A Case of Cultural Criticism', in *The Language of Fashion*, p. 113.

⁷³ Sage vol. I, p. 17, p. 28.