Chapter 1

Introduction, life, work

Edward Wadie Said died at a hospital in New York City, on 25 September 2003, of complications attendant on the chronic form of lymphatic leukaemia with which he had struggled since 1991. He was sixty-seven years old. University Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at New York's prestigious Columbia University, it can be reasonably speculated that he was at that time the most widely known intellectual in the world.

In the ensuing days, tributes to Said filled the media. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan declared: 'Both the Middle East and the United States will be the poorer without his distinctive voice.'[1] Alan Brinkley, the Provost of Columbia University where Said had spent most of his professional career, said in *Columbia News* that 'Edward Said was a great scholar, a great teacher, and a beloved member of the Columbia community for 40 years.' Furthermore, Brinkley said, 'We will greatly miss this kind, gentle, and generous colleague and friend. It is hard to imagine Columbia without him.' Meanwhile, Columbia's President, Lee C. Bollinger, opined that Said's 'death is an irreplaceable loss to the realm of ideas and for those who believe in the redemptive power of the life of the mind'.[2]

Others remembered Said differently. 'A mighty and a passionate heart has ceased to beat', Alexander Cockburn, the radical Anglo-Irish journalist and leading figure of the New Left, wrote on his *Counterpunch* website. Cockburn suggested that: '[A]t the top of his form his prose has the pitiless, relentless clarity of Swift', a compliment Said would have enjoyed, and a hint at his reputation as a polemical writer, as a writer 'to the moment', responding with wit and learning to current events.[3] But this was also an indication of Said's controversial status, a matter that emerged in other obituaries.

The *New York Times* notice, by Richard Bernstein, was notable in this regard. It was preoccupied with Said's Palestinian nationalism, making cursory and inaccurate remarks about his literary-critical works. It suggested that Said's first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966), was where 'he

began to explore themes that led to his theories about culture and imperialism', yet what is striking about this book is its largely apolitical understanding of Conrad. Empire would not become a major theme of Said's criticism for another decade. Bernstein suggested that in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said portrayed E. M. Forster, Conrad, and Rudyard Kipling as having been 'engaged in a novelistic process whose main purpose was not to raise more questions . . . but to keep the empire more or less in place', yet in this book Said goes to considerable lengths to show how anxiety about the future of empire is dramatised in such works. Of Said's most famous book, *Orientalism* (1978), Bernstein argued that it was a relativistic work that denied the possibility of 'objective neutral scholarship on Asia and especially on the Arab world'. He cited only negative assessments of the book, such as that of the English historian J. H. Plumb, without exploring the massive influence the book has had on a wide variety of humanistic and social-scientific fields.

More aggressively, the obituary concentrated on Said's Palestinian politics, and linked him to positions that he never took up when alive. It noted that Said was for fourteen years a member of the Palestine National Council, the Palestinian parliament-in-exile, while also pointing out that George Habash, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, sat in the same assembly. Even more pointedly, Bernstein associated Said with Abu Abbas, 'a member of the PLO executive committee who is believed responsible for the hijacking of the Italian cruise ship *Achille Lauro* and the murder of an American tourist, Leon Klinghoffer, who was in a wheelchair'. Said's condemnation of Abbas as 'a degenerate' was, for Bernstein, clearly fatally eroded by Said's alleged description of Israeli former Prime Ministers Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir as terrorists also. Said was referring to Begin's and Shamir's leadership of the Irgun Zvai Leumi and the LEHI groups of far-rightwing Jewish guerillas in 1940s Palestine. Bernstein noted Said's criticism of Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa on Salman Rushdie and his description of Saddam Hussein as 'an appalling and dreadful despot', but reckoned that Said 'was far more critical of the West and of Israel and their approach to the Arab world than he was of the Arabs or their leaders'.[4]

The *New York Times* a few days later published a 'correction' to its original obituary. The original had 'misidentified the city that was [Said's] childhood home'. Said was born in Jerusalem in 1935, the article acknowledged, but 'his family's home was Cairo; they did not move from Jerusalem'. This adjustment was an echo of the attack by Justus Reid Weiner, in *Commentary*, an American Zionist magazine, on Said's patrimony in 1999, just as he published his memoir *Out of Place*. Weiner suggested that Said had invented a mythical childhood in Palestine, yet had been a scion of a wealthy Cairo family.[5]

Other writers noted the sourness of the *New York Times* article. Michael Wood, in the *London Review of Books*, argued that the *Times* obituary 'was full of apologies for being there at all – as if merely to mention Edward's name was to be a partisan'.[6] Marina Warner, in *Open Democracy*, suggested that it 'disgracefully rehearses ancient grudges and slurs, not recognising that the secular polity Edward so fearlessly and honestly struggled for in Israel/Palestine resembles the life of its own polyglot and multiethnic Manhattan rather more closely than Sharon's Israel'. The *Times*, for Warner, in Said's home town of forty years, 'managed to be mean-spirited about one of the finest representatives of some ideals of the old United States . . . : freedom of speech, independence of mind, civil conscience and humanist sympathies across all borders of ethnic and political identity'.[7]

The point here is not merely to enumerate the obsequies paid to Edward Said – evidently a major task in itself – but to show how even in death Said's reputation and work polarised and polarises opinion. In principle at least, Said would have welcomed this ferment of interest – not merely the adulation, but also the contrary opinions. Much of the power and interest of Said's literary-critical and political work was derived from his sense of writing as a practice and cultural form taking active part in its circumstances, in day-to-day social and political debates, movements, and struggles. Said's favoured term for this idea, as we shall see later in this book, was 'worldliness'.

Why was Said so controversial? We can start by saying that he was controversial on at least two levels. Academically, he was controversial because his work crossed disciplinary boundaries, 'interfering' (a term he on at least one occasion raised to a description of right intellectual practice) in areas outside of his professional expertise; and because he engaged frequently in an historicist criticism that sought to locate works of Western literature in the context of empire.[8] Outside the academy, Said was controversial because he was active in the cause of Palestine, the place of his birth and patrimony. Much of Said's published work was actually on the 'question of Palestine', a fact not always attended to in assessments of his work, and there is a strong case to be made that his interest in Palestine significantly influenced his entire *oeuvre*.

This book seeks to perform a number of tasks. It will introduce Said by way of a brief discussion of his memoir of his early life, *Out of Place*. It will then offer an account of Said's major works and projects, by moving into his writings along two trajectories. Firstly, it will explore Said's work through his major influences and intellectual contexts. Secondly, it will explore the same work as it is presented and organised in his most important books. Lastly, the book will give a brief account of some of the chief responses to Said's work.

This description seems cut and dried, as if these areas could be easily divided and held apart. What the reader will realise fairly quickly is that these areas actually routinely and importantly intersect in Said. The life will illustrate and inform our understanding of the work, and the work will be revealed as part of Said's way of living his life. The influences on him will be revealed to have been both reproduced and re-inflected in new ways. Equally, Said will be shown often to have responded in a dynamic manner to receptions of his own work.

At a conference to commemorate Said and his work held at the School of African and Oriental Studies at the University of London in 2004, the British Jamaican sociologist Stuart Hall finished his talk by saying of Said that 'we will not see his like again'. In this formulation, Hall was pointing out both Said's evident importance for the academic humanities and for the Palestinian cause, and also, in a less banal way, the fact that a very particular complex of historical, political, cultural, and intellectual forces combined themselves in Said's life and work.[9] The conditions of possibility for a figure of Said's ilk are passing, Hall was suggesting. This is a valuable point, as it allows us to start thinking historically about Edward Said. Let us look briefly both at the history from which Said himself emerged and, in a preliminary way, at how Said thought about the self and history, at the start and the end of his career.

Beginning with Edward Said: history, biography, criticism

Edward Said was born in 1935, to Palestinian parents, in a large stone house in Talbiyah, in the western quarter of Jerusalem. His father, Wadie Said, was a successful Palestinian businessman, whose stationery firm was headquartered in Cairo. The Said family moved in this period in a circuit between Jerusalem, Cairo, and the Lebanese hill resort of Dhour el-Shweir. Edward was educated at various schools in Jerusalem and in Cairo, culminating in his time spent at Victoria College, a prestigious school run by British teachers for the Arab elite.

In his early teens, Said was expelled from Victoria College, and his parents took the drastic measure of sending him to the United States, to Mount Hermon, a preparatory school in New Hampshire. From there, the young Said moved on to Princeton, and eventually to Harvard for graduate study. In 1963, he became an assistant professor at Columbia University in New York City. He won tenure in 1966, and spent the rest of his professional life there.

Even from this very basic sketch, then, it is possible to see that Edward Said, the prominent Palestinian American literary critic and public intellectual,

emerged out of a complex network or conjuncture of historical, ethnic, and political forces. It is fair to say that these forces shaped him, but it is also important to note that without this context or set of contexts, the extraordinary phenomenon that was 'Edward Said' would not have had the same importance or force.

By the time Said was born, the forces that would shape the modern Middle East about which he was to write so often were already crystallising, in the form of extensive Jewish immigration to Palestine and emergent Palestinian national consciousness, which would lead eventually to partition, war, and the ethnic cleansing of approximately three-quarters of a million native Palestinians as a result of the bloody birth of Israel in 1948. This historical background is important to Said's work, in ways that are sometimes explicit, as in his critical and political writing on Palestine and on the Middle East more broadly, and also equally often implicit. In an interview with the editors of the avant-garde critical journal *Diacritics*, on the occasion of the publication of his first major book, *Beginnings* (1975), Said declared that:

> until fairly recently I led two quite separate lives, which has always made me acutely appreciative of Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*. On the one hand, I am a literary scholar, critic and teacher, I lead a pretty uncontroversial life in a big university, and I've done a fair amount of work which has always been plugged into the established channels. That's a function of a certain education, the appearance of a certain social background. Yet I lead another life, which most other literary people say nothing about (and this is a kind of acrobatics which people who know me can manage, with my helping them along: I've been very good at this). It's as if it isn't there, although many of them know that it is. My whole background in the Middle East, my frequent and sometimes protracted visits there, my political involvement: all this exists in a totally different box from the one out of which I pop as a literary critic, professor etc. Now the second, and older, life is encroaching fairly seriously on the other one, and this is a difficult juncture for me.[10]

This interview took place just at the point when Said was about to begin what might be called the major phase of his work. He had just published *Beginnings: Intention and Method*; he had already written most of the book that was to make him internationally famous, *Orientalism*; he was already at work on *The Question of Palestine* (1979); and he was also at this time writing and publishing many of the essays that would make up *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983). It is significant that it is precisely at this moment that we find Said reflecting on his complex identity as an advanced Euro-American critic with a Palestinian background, and striving to bring each of these spheres to

bear on the other. It is a truism to say that much literary criticism is a form of sublimated or hidden autobiography, but with Edward Said we will find that the links between national history and critical work have an unusual salience.

Modern critics debate the distinctions between 'memoir' and 'autobiography'. It is suggested that autobiography makes a claim to comprehensiveness, objectivity, and accuracy, while memoir is more modest, self-consciously impressionistic, without aspiration to rigour or historical status. Said describes his book as 'a memoir', and he opens its Preface with a statement of its conditions of production and of its justification:

> *Out of Place* is a record of an essentially lost or forgotten world. Several years ago, I received what seemed to be a fatal medical diagnosis, and it therefore struck me as important to leave behind a subjective account of the life I lived in the Arab world, where I was born and spent my formative years, and in the United States, where I went to school, college and university. Many of the places and people I recall here no longer exist, though I found myself frequently amazed at how much I carried of them inside me in often minute, even startlingly concrete, detail.[11]

Furthermore, he believes that the book has

> some validity as an unofficial personal record [of the years between his birth and the completion of his doctorate in 1962]. I found myself telling the story of my life against the background of World War II, the loss of Palestine and the establishment of Israel, the end of the Egyptian monarchy, the Nasser years, the 1967 War, the emergence of the Palestinian movement, the Lebanese Civil War, and the Oslo peace process. These are in my memoir only allusively, even though their fugitive presence can be seen here and there.[12]

We can take from this the point that Said believes that his narrative of his youth has a significance beyond the personal. His story can be read in a number of ways. Schematically, we might say that these are: (1) the personal level – the description of Said's childhood in Jerusalem, Cairo, Lebanon, and the United States; (2) the level of historical reconstruction or recovery – Said is clearly interested in his story's status as 'a record of an essentially lost or forgotten world', and in its ability to reinstall and give voice to that world; (3) the political-historical level – Said's life intersects with and illustrates the turbulent and varied history of the Middle East since the 1940s.

In using Said's memoir, and his other autobiographical writings, we must bear a number of theoretical points in mind. Principally, most of these writings date from late in his life. This means, naturally, that he writes of his life with the benefit of hindsight, and with the intellectual equipment of a lifetime's

work in literary study. Said was not just any memoirist when he came to write this work: he was one of the most prominent literary critics in the world. It is inevitable, therefore, that the ideas, skills, and techniques of his training and years of study would affect his writing about his own past.

For the fact is that *Out of Place* is configured in ways that conform to a number of Said's critical and intellectual preoccupations through his career. Said himself makes this very clear in 'Between Worlds', an essay he published while writing the memoir.[13] He begins this essay by remembering that his first book was on Conrad – *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* – and by noting Conrad's status as 'the wanderer who becomes an accomplished writer in an acquired language, but [who] can never shake off his sense of alienation from his new – that is, acquired – and . . . admired home'.[14] For Said, Conrad was the writer of 'dislocation, instability and strangeness' *par excellence*: 'No one could represent the fate of lostness and disorientation better than he did, and no one was more ironic about the effort of trying to replace that condition with new arrangements and accommodations.'[15] Marlow, Conrad's famous narrator, enters the 'heart of darkness' only to find that Kurtz was there before him, and that he nevertheless cannot tell the whole truth. Said attributes both this quest for truth, in Conrad, and the ironic suspension of its success, to Conrad's exile from his Polish background. 'Eventually', he writes, 'we realise that the work is actually constituted by the experience of exile or alienation that cannot ever be rectified.' Said finds this dilemma most pointedly dramatised in Conrad's short story 'Amy Foster', where the exiled young man washed up on England's shore finally dies 'inconsolable, alone, talking away in a language no one could understand'. For Said, this image, which he had also mobilised in a much earlier essay 'Reflections on Exile', is the ultimate representation of the pain of exile. He suggests that Conrad himself, the Polish exile, must have feared such an end.

But as the Irish critic Seamus Deane suggests in a fine essay on *Out of Place*, this is clearly Said also writing about himself.[16] As Said himself says, Conrad has run through his writing 'like a *cantus firmus*, a steady groundbass to much that I have experienced'.[17] In the most literal sense, we find Conrad as the subject of Said's doctoral dissertation and of his first book based on that dissertation. His work is treated at length in *Beginnings*, Said's first major theoretical statement, published in 1975. It also appears in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, published in 1983, and then again in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993). Said wrote more about Conrad than he did about any other single figure. Clearly, he had made a series of powerful identifications with the Polish writer. We may then think of Said's life and career as an effort also to evade the fate of Yanko Goorall, the young hero of 'Amy Foster', and indeed to avoid

the fate of numerous other Conradian heroes, Marlow most notably, for whom communication is always fraught and frequently a failure. For Conrad, and for Said, we may take it that writing emerges out of an existential fear of silence.

Describing the way he came to write the memoir, Said tells of how he had learned in 1991 of his diagnosis with the leukaemia that would eventually kill him, and this prompted him to try to put narrative order on his life. 'I found myself brought up short with some though not a great deal of time available to survey a life whose eccentricities I had accepted like so many facts of nature.' In this attempt, 'I recognised that Conrad had been there before me.'[18] Yet Said sees that the moves that Conrad made, away from his Polish patrimony, and towards Englishness (initially via the medium of the French language), were in many ways not as wrenching as those that he himself had made, from Palestine and Egypt, to the United States and American academia.

But Conrad is only the most explicitly acknowledged influence here. As we shall see in Chapter Two, Said early in his academic career conceived a fascination with the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico. At the moment when he published his study of Conrad, Said also published an essay entitled 'Vico: Autodidact and Humanist'. Vico took himself and his own life, and his own intellectual leanings, as the start of his project:

> For he was preeminently an autodidact (*autodidascolo*) . . . Everything he learned, he learned for and by himself; he seems to have been convinced of his individuality and strength of mind from his earliest days, and most of the time his *Autobiography* is an account of this self-learning.[19]

Preparing to read Vico's philosophical masterpiece, *The New Science*, in relation to Vico's *Autobiography*, Said points out that what he believes to be 'the anchoring centre of Vico's work . . . is a paradigm of the disengaged, neutralized mind that is locked in a conflict with itself. The mind's role as an infinite series of modifications on the one hand is opposed by its role on the other as total structure.'[20] It is important for us to realise here, with our brief discussion of Said's early life and his writing about that early life in relation to Conrad, that this model of intellectual activity and linguistic, social, and historical analysis as evolving out of an internal mental drama is one which Said held over the course of his long and varied career. Writing a memoir was entirely of a piece with that model of work, and that sense of thought as both dramatic and conflictual. Writing a memoir was, in terms that Said had set out himself at the start of his intellectual career, a highly Vichian activity. Writing a memoir was, at least in part, Said turning back to reflect – in terms that would echo through his writings – on his own 'autodidacticism', his own 'self-learning', his own 'beginnings', his own 'authority' as an author.

One of the first and perhaps most important things to note about *Out of Place* is that it is a narrative not only about growing up in Jerusalem, Dhour el-Shweir, and Cairo, but also about moving into the West, towards the United States. *Out of Place* concludes with Said as a graduate student at Harvard, about to take up employment at Columbia University in New York City, where he spent the great bulk of his professional life. To this extent, then, the comparison with Conrad, who identified ever more powerfully with England as his life and career developed, holds. But while Jozef Teodor Naleczc Korzeniowski became Joseph Conrad, and was offered a knighthood (though he turned it down), Edward Said never became fully or comfortably American. The Scottish historian of nationalism, Tom Nairn, wrote in 1994 of Said that he was marked as a member of a Third World elite destined for successful Western metropolitan assimilation, yet he had, over his career, turned back to his natal place and tried to do justice to its politics. The effort, Nairn suggests, broke Said apart.[21] Yet, what we find in 'Between Worlds' is Said reveling in this status.

In the opening chapter of the memoir, Said discusses his name. In his name, he finds an opening formulation of the paradoxes of identity that shaped his life, and also his work. All families invent their parents and their children, he points out, but he finds that there was always something anomalous about the way that he was invented: 'Yet the overriding sensation I had was of always being out of place.'[22] Thus, in his first sentence, Said is acknowledging that his family shaped him, but also, implicitly, that he is now engaged in the act of giving an 'invented' shape to his family. For Said, the primary paradox of his identity is to be found in the oxymoron or contradiction of his own name: '"Edward", a foolishly English name, yoked forcibly to the unmistakably Arabic family name Said'.[23] Edward, his mother told him, was the name of the English Prince of Wales in 1935, the year of Said's birth. He describes how in later years he would, depending on the social situation, stress either his English name, or his Arabic one. He always resented and was unsettled by the unbelieving reactions of acquaintances and friends: 'Edward? Said?' The conjoining of as quintessentially English a name as that borne by the Prince of Wales, and an almost stereotypically Arab name, is suggestive of the unresolved paradoxes of his identity.

If this name was peculiar and somewhat confusing for a child and young man, its contradictions and discomforts did not ease or go away. Rather, as Said tells his readers more about his family background, the jarring ambiguities only increase and become more glaring. He tells us that he could not find any Said grandparents. He cannot remember which was his first language, Arabic or English, but 'the two have always been together in my life, one resonating

in the other, sometimes ironically, sometimes nostalgically, most often each correcting, and commenting on, the other'.[24] This he attributes to the influence of his mother, who spoke to him in both languages, though she always wrote to him in English. But she also deployed the two languages in different ways: Arabic – 'forgiving and musical' – for love and intimacy with her young son, English – 'more objective and serious' – for discipline and order.[25]

Hilda Said's background was complex and confusing; that of Said's father, Wadie, was even more so. She was born in Nazareth, to a Palestinian father and a Lebanese mother. She was schooled in Beirut. Even her father's career hints at the geographical variousness that would be part of Edward's life – he was the Baptist minister in Nazareth, though he was originally from Safad, 'via a sojourn in Texas'.[26] Wadie Said was an American citizen, but even his name is a matter of confusion: his surname had been Ibrahim, and later in his life he changed Wadie to William: 'I still do not know where "Said" came from, and no-one seems able to explain it.'[27] Said tells us that his father had been encouraged by his family in 1911 to evade being drafted into the Ottoman Turkish army by escaping to the United States. Said compares the laconic and sketchy manner in which his father told him of his journey to America to the stories of Horatio Alger. Wadie travelled first to Liverpool, in his late teens, and then worked his passage to New York as a waiter on a transatlantic liner. In America, he became a salesman, and went to university. He served with the American Expeditionary Force in France in 1917, acquired American citizenship, and set up a painting company in Cleveland. He returned to Palestine in 1920, apparently at his mother's suggestion, as William A. Said: he had 'quite abruptly turned sober pioneer, hardworking and successful businessman, and Protestant, a resident first of Jerusalem then of Cairo. This was the man I knew.'[28]

Said sets up a dramatic contrast between his parents. His father is represented as a formidable Victorian patriarch – energetic, driven, and commanding: 'a devastating combination of power and authority, rationalistic discipline, and repressed emotions'.[29] Wadie Said's control of his son is described as a 'regime' that has induced in Edward a relentless and unsettled sense of never having achieved enough, the necessity of '"never giving up"'. Hilda Said, in comparison, was 'certainly my closest and most intimate companion for the first twenty-five years of my life'.[30] He attributes to her influence certain crucial traits he sees in himself: chronic sleeplessness, worry about alternative paths of action, restless energy, his interest in music and language, and also in style, and a combination of both sociability and 'a cultivation of loneliness as a form both of freedom and of affliction'.[31] But there was also a less happy side to his relationship with his mother: his sense that she would sometimes, inexplicably, withdraw her affection or attention from him. This added to his sense of