

*Can we be literary citizens  
of many cultures?*

## THE WORLD, THE TEXT & EDWARD SAID

by Philip Sicker

Jorge Luis Borges, in his disquieting story "The Library of Babel," describes a mythical institution in which all books, all verbal structures, all symbols, all human knowledge is labeled and catalogued. This library, whose stacks contain everything expressed in language—from chronicles of the ancient past to imaginary histories of the future—inspires, at first glimpse, an "extravagant joy"; each man feels himself to be "lord of a secret, intact treasure." But the library, like the human experience it records, is constantly expanding; its periodic inventory extends so far beyond the range of man's individual or cultural comprehension that the library becomes identical, not with the finite world of a single volume, but with the limitless, protean universe itself.

The uninitiated visitor to a modern university library may sense something akin to both the exhilaration and the terror that Borges describes. One is reminded, by the sprawling concatenations of architecture, if by nothing else, that any designated field of intellectual specialization exists as a discipline only through the systematic exclusion of other branches of knowledge. Edward Said's new book, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Harvard University Press; 327 pp.; \$20.00), extends this notion of separation and closure not merely to the field of literary criticism but to Western culture at large. What Said fears, however, is not the specter of Borges's library but, rather, the narrowness of a jealously guarded cultural tradition based on an outmoded system of exclusions and a hegemonic hatred of everything not itself. For the first time in our history, he suggests, the humanistic studies that form a traditional university curriculum can represent "only a fraction of the real human relationships and interactions now taking place in the world." In short, the culture has come to exclude more knowledge than it includes.

This problem is especially acute in the Anglo-American "literary consciousness," within which Said includes writers, critics, and teachers of literature. Matthew Arnold's pronouncement that "culture" should embody "the best that has been thought and written" had been directed against the narrow-minded philistinism of this age; but, for Said,

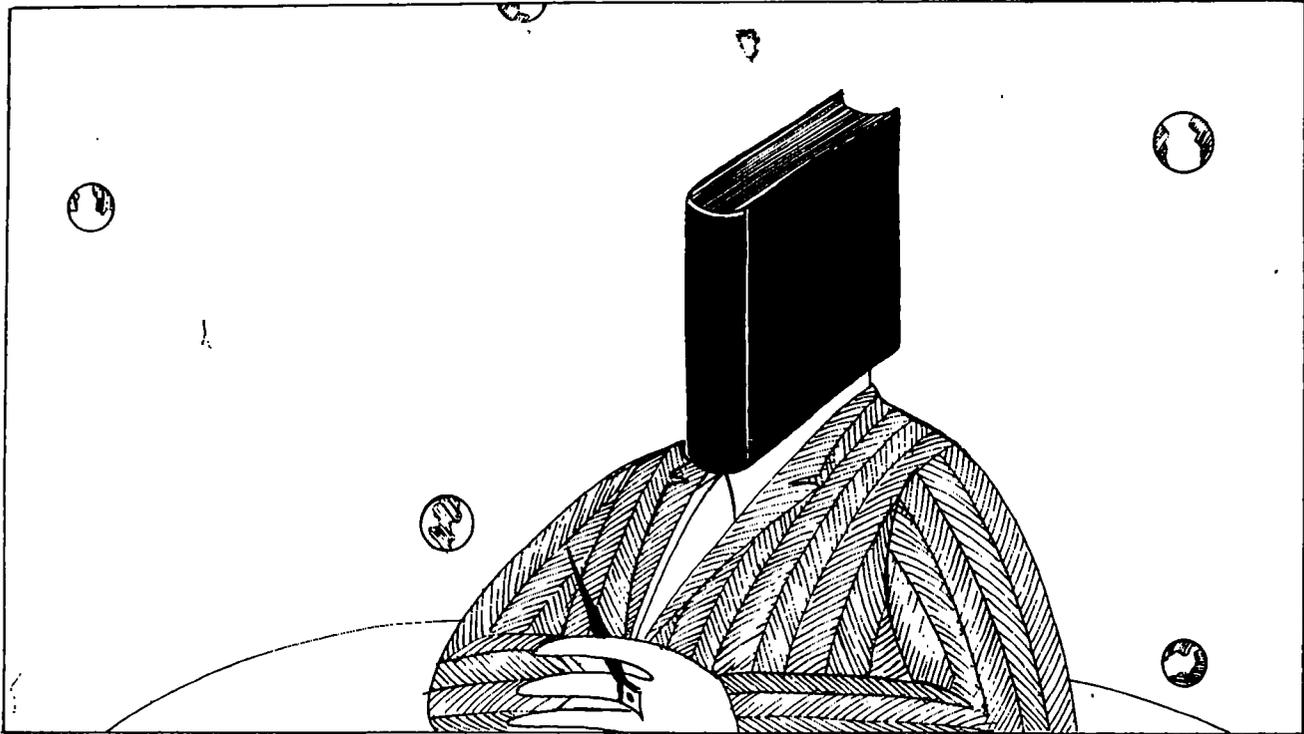
*Culture and Anarchy* is a rather hazardous document that seeks both moral and political sanctions for its constrictively Western notion of literary culture. Eliot's subsequent identification of a distinctively English poetic tradition that shapes each "individual talent" anticipates F. R. Leavis's more pernicious insistence upon a "great tradition" of moral concern in British fiction during the last two centuries.

A survey of any popular literary anthology bears out Said's claim that these critics and others, high priests of our civilization, have made it the duty of humanistic scholars to devote themselves "to the study of the great monuments of literature." The enshrinement of certain texts—*The Canterbury Tales*, *Gulliver's Travels*, and "The Intimations Ode," to name just a few—has not only served the cause of cultural retrenchment against non-Western literary influences, but, more important, has distorted and domesticated the texts themselves by removing them from circumstantial reality—from the "existential actualities of human life, politics, societies and events" that contributed to their production. Thus, sealed off from life in the exploding present and from the complex matrix of history, the text qua text exists for the contemporary critic as a hermetic world in which rigidly codified formalist, structuralist, semiotic, and deconstructionist methodologies may be applied freely.

Whether or not one agrees with Said's quasi-Marxist assessment of the state of present-day criticism, one suspects that there are more complex contributing causes. I would suggest that the contemporary critical consciousness, which regards the work as a baroque textual universe in which interpretation is subjective, unverifiable, and ultimately futile, is as much a response to a particular temperament in modernist literature as it is the function of a restrictive cultural tradition. Joyce remarked of *Ulysses* to an inquiring early critic: "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant." This was more than prescient. It was an invitation to scholars to inhabit the novel as a self-sustaining world, a laboratory in which the seemingly messy accumulation of sensory and psychic data would ultimately resolve itself into any number of gestalts. If Arnold inadvertently applied an artificial sense of closure to the idea of culture, Joyce, even as he sought to subsume an entire civilization, deliberately applied a more radical

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demarcation to the idea of a text. Other works of high modernism, such as Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Pound's *Cantos*, and Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, implicitly extend the same license that *Ulysses* does. Rather than existing as an event in the public world (as, say, *Middlemarch* or *War and Peace*), modernist literature has often sought a kind of colloquy between the writer and the specialized critic, be he a reader of myths, signs, or verbal patterns.

Twenty years ago, in "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag decried the "hypertrophy" of the modern critical intellect: "To interpret is to impoverish, to deplete the world in order to set up a shadow world of meanings." More recently, the novelist Robert Coover has complained that the contemporary writers of fiction "have been brought into a blind alley by critics and analysts." There is some truth to both these claims, but the critic's tendency toward system-making during the last two decades is, in part, an after-shadow of the same proclivity in modernist texts as diverse as Yeats's *A Vision* and Woolf's *The Waves*.

#### PURE TEXTUALITY

Much of the postmodernist fiction produced since the end of World War II has intensified this vicious cycle. Works such as Beckett's *Molloy*, Barth's "Lost in the Funhouse," Pynchon's *V*, and Borges's *Labyrinths* go beyond the mere awareness of a specialized critical audience. They build a myriad of critical apparatuses into the text itself. Borges and Pynchon superimpose one mirage of parodic mythic pattern upon another: Barth intercuts his stories with a pedantic critical dissection of the narrative; Beckett, in his most minimalist phase, invents voices that, aware of the relativity and arbitrariness of language, deconstruct their own words and text. Whether the intention of these fictions is to encourage the critic, mock his efforts, or absorb his role, all are written with the critic in mind. Instead of the critic existing for the illumination of the text, as Arnold had proposed, the text is *created for* the specialized critic.

Nowhere is this peculiar symbiosis more brilliantly demonstrated than in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, where a Robert Frost-like poet named John Shade has an unpublished poem appropriated after his death by a psychotic scholar. In an elaborate set of footnotes that constitutes the novel, the critic produces a hilarious misreading of the poem as an epic based upon his own fantasy life. If Nabokov is, on the one hand, mocking the parasitic critic who makes the text his private abode, he is simultaneously beckoning his reader into one of the most cloistered, self-referential fictions ever produced. This complication of roles and purposes has produced an odd paradox in contemporary letters: If critics such as Frye, Bloom, Barthes, and Derrida have sought to elevate the dismantling and reconstitution of a text to the level of imaginative art, contemporary writers from Beckett to Calvino have made fiction a form of self-criticism.

While this paradoxical relationship between critic and artist would have delighted Oscar Wilde, for whom the task of the critic was to "invent fresh forms" at increasing removes from life, it disturbs critics like Said, for whom such wall-to-wall discourses reduce the text, literary consciousness, and, finally, culture itself to a kind of echo-chamber. This critical myopia is especially ironic when one recalls that Jacques Derrida or Michel Foucault, who are today canonized by the American literati and solicited for literary criticism, are not literary critics. The former is a philosopher, the latter a historian-anthropologist. Far from broadening literary culture by restoring texts to the intellectual and social soil out of which they grew, each has schematized and diminished them. As Said explains, they have done so from antithetical directions. For Derrida, the text is a mercurial assemblage of words, different for every reader, with no grounding in actuality. For Foucault, the text does have a claim on actuality, but only as an expression of cultural power, an invisible and anonymous network that negates the force of individual artistic inten-

tion and any clear disclosure of meaning. For both, then, the text essentially *hides* its meanings; it harbors inaccessible secrets that draw the initiate deeper into its labyrinth. It matters little whether the source of that mystery lies in semantics or in anthropology.

There is something altogether refreshing in Said's insistence that *all* literary works—even postmodernist hybrids—are an artist's highly complex but ultimately interpretable response to the social and intellectual dynamics of his age. Although Said devotes his deeply informed textual analyses to works of Conrad and Swift—writers who were quintessentially aware of language as both a personal and political expression of power—he would probably examine a work like Borges's "The South" in the interpenetrating contexts of twentieth-century metaphysics, Gaucho folklore, and South American politics. In the same vein, he is quick to point out that contemporary critical codes, which blithely convert everything in the text into evidence for the efficacy of their method, ultimately derive from circumstances in the existential world. For Said, as for Georg Lukacs and Raymond Williams before him, "for each poem or novel in the canon there is a social fact being requisitioned...a human life engaged, a class suppressed or elevated." Criticism, thus, becomes an exhaustive historical and psycho-biographical enterprise whose method is intellectual saturation.

But how much of this "worldliness," this circumstantial fabric of past life, can ever really be known? Even as Said discusses Conrad's use of a speaker and listener in his narratives to give utterance to a greater sense of actuality and vision, we are reminded of Marlow's lament as he labors to evoke the dead Kurtz for his silent audience: "No, it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence—that which makes its truth, its meaning—its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live as we dream, alone...." Similarly, though the competing subjective accounts of the Sulacan revolution in Conrad's *Nostramo* may, by a process of superimposition, bring us closer to ontological truth, the real events remain eternally obscured. As Conrad's interpreter, Said is in an analogous position. How much evidence is enough? To what degree can historical reconstruction ever be trusted? Whereas most contemporary critical approaches, though they deny interpretative validity, encase the text within a rigid system, Said's demanding secular criticism seems as open-ended as Borges's library.

#### CULTURE AND CLOSURE

Said's even broader indictment of the Western literary tradition for its exclusion of Orientalist works requires an

extraordinary confidence in the individual scholar's capacity to digest unlimited quantities of raw historical material from another culture. When, for example, Said digresses from his attack upon the cult of pure textuality to consider Arabic linguistic speculations in eleventh-century Andalusia, his erudition tends to intimidate the Western reader who would approach these tracts. As an Arab educated in the West and a professor of English at Columbia, Said is in a unique position to offer such cultural abridgments. But one wonders at his implication that Western readers can learn to understand Zahirite philology within its immensely rich yet specialized cultural context. Theoretically, the knowable may be infinite, but experientially, the Western mind seems to require a sense of closure, not only in the practice of criticism, but in the very notion of culture itself.

The roots of this need, I think, lie deeper than the Victorians' xenophobic distrust of Orientalist learning. Nor is our circumscribed concept of culture simply a modernist response to the collapse of traditional religious, social, and moral systems of affiliative order. Perhaps the real answer lies in a basic difference between East and West that Said himself considers.

In an earlier book, *Beginnings* (1975), Said noted that until the present century there were no novels or autobiography in Arabic literature. These genres, which create an alternative world or augment the real one, were considered heretical because the Islamic world view begins and ends with the Koran. The word for heresy in Arabic is, in fact, synonymous with the verb "to innovate" or "to begin." Unlike the Bible, which was composed by various writers over several centuries and which cannot be reduced to a specific moment of divine intervention at which the Word of God enters human history, the Koran is a single, unique event that has its own beginning and end outside of human time. The Koran, Said explains, speaks of historical events but, unlike the Book of Revelations, is neither personal nor historical itself. The Islamic art that it inspires may illustrate but never modify its fundamental truth. In short, Islam has at its center a sacred text that not only provides a religious and ethical system but also a form of cultural closure. Lacking this kind of authority in the West, our writers and critics from the Renaissance to the present have forged a secular culture of their own.

The formidable challenge that today faces writers and critics alike is not to extend the national borders of our literary tradition but, rather, to rescue both art and criticism from the narrow provinces of academic specialists and reintegrate them in the living civilization from which they have retreated. WY

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# COMING

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