

## Book Reviews

Paul A. Bové, ed. *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power*. London: Duke UP, 2000. Pp. 317 \$63.95; \$21.95 pb.

Like any anthology on a living writer, this collection is both mixed in quality and vexed by proximity to its source. The book arrives at the end of a decade of similar anthologies on Said, who is personally known by — and in some cases a good friend of — many of the contributors to the volume. Such is the fate of any book written on someone with Said's standing. The very genre makes it unavoidable. But there is, in addition, a certain discomfort produced by a volume that wants to "speak truth to power" while finding its insights bumping up against politeness, or seeing its anecdotal accuracy at times colliding with a taste for the honorific. Perhaps we get out of the difficulty by seeing the book's intentions as rather praising — *Festschrift*-like — an intellectual and teacher who really has spoken truth to power.

But even on those terms, one notices a failure of nerve. Many of the essays search desperately for a Said who staked out middle-grounds, interstitial positions, happy compromises, not one who risked censure or took unpopular stands in the name of an intransigent truth. If there is a dominant theme coursing through the essays, it is that Said has found a way to recuperate the aesthetic artifact, and reinvent the act of aesthetic savoring in spite of his popular association with a readier and more demotic intervention — a statement half true. The volume is advertised as a "boundary 2 book." It may or may not be the journal-collective's editorial tastes that give us so many essays of the middle tendency. But in any event, several conjoin in a similar (indeed emphatic) story: that there are no "pre-existing polarities," that politics is really morality, that an aesthetics of sensualism links Said's effort to those of Adorno and Paul de Man, that Said's critical essays are "art forms," and that Said's invocation of a *secular* criticism is based, actually, on Erich Auerbach's (and Hannah Arendt's) profoundly Jewish sense of diasporic, postnational longing.

Blended with this ameliorative *telos* are, however, essays and interviews of substantial interest. The opening interview with Jacqueline Rose, for

example, is exhilaratingly confrontational, and establishes a tone noticeably at odds with the interpretations of the contributors alluded to above. More accurately, Said is the one who establishes the tone by attacking deconstruction, placing his emphasis on what he calls (in a deliberately old-fashioned way) “historical facts,” subordinates his interests in the modernist canon to the job of “fusing the moral will to the grasping of evidence,” and modestly portrays himself as much less than a public politician (that is, not measuring up to one) but still modelled on one. There are more than enough published interviews with Said to see him caught, delightfully, in an unguarded posture, talking colloquially in a rapid, at times disjointed prose — the kind of talk that reveals a person’s points of reference better than any other. It is worth pointing out that almost all of his references at such times are to injustices and absurdities in the world of American current events, or anecdotes of British imperial racism, or humorous accounts of people’s agendas as revealed in personal discussions.

If Said, in his own words, does not square well with the volume’s predominant interpretations of him, nevertheless W. J. T. Mitchell’s interview on visual culture rescues the early part of the book, and unearths new lines of inquiry. It seems at first unpromising because, by Said’s own admission, the visual arts are not his strong suit. Mitchell’s probing questions, however, have a way of putting Said at ease, and they produce an offhandedness that brings important information to view — for example, that Said has been compiling an archive of eight to nine thousand Palestinian photographs since 1948 and that Foucault is far less the Saidian icon than we suppose. With some mixed emotion, Said charges the French thinker with using epistemology as a “theatrical instrument” (42) and for “dramatiz[ing] himself” (43).

Still, the volume confronts several difficulties that prove difficult to overcome. Michael Sprinker’s pioneering anthology *Edward Said: A Critical Reader* (Blackwell, 1992) in many ways covered the territory that all later work has since been forced to traverse. Only sporadically do the volume’s essays produce a new tack or revelation. The principal themes — Said as public intellectual, as a proponent of philological humanism, as enemy of “system,” as embodiment of the diasporic consciousness, as critic of Foucault, as the founder of postcolonial theory, and so on — arose in much the same terms in the Sprinker volume, and reappear in recent critical biographies by Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, as well as Valerie Kennedy. While Keith Ansell-Pearson, Benita Parry and Judith Squires’s *Cultural Readings of Imperialism: Edward Said and the Gravity of History* (St. Martin’s, 1997) expands the Saidian inquiry by applying his positions to the historical research of younger scholars, there is no such departure here.

The volume tends to include essays that somewhat instrumentally employ Said as an occasion to avoid speaking about him. It is actually rather striking that in an anthology about Edward Said a number of

contributions were clearly first written without any thought of Said at all. In these, excerpts from the authors' projects are put on display along with a few cursory references to Said appended to the beginning or ending of the essays. This practice seems less a subtle statement of their own fealty to Said (or their inspired solidarity with him) than attempts to cut and paste current work onto a pre-designated theme. At least one exception can be found in Barbara Harlow's "Sappers in the Stacks: Colonial Archives, Land Mines and Truth Commissions." A Saidian to the marrow, she has so internalized his meanings, that in her case she perhaps considers it too unseemly to pay homage to a single man, however dear, while there is truth to be told to power. Her incisively written case for mastering the colonial archive is taken from a case-book she compiled for students, and perfectly complements her status as one of the very few postcolonial scholars to take Zionism on without blinking.

On that score, Rashid Khalidi's no-nonsense account of the torture of being Arab in the environs of the American media is similarly well-developed. Unlike many of the contributors here, Khalidi speaks with a passion that is possible only away from the academic backbiting that often attends Saidian interpretation in literary critical circles. For his part, Mustapha Marrouchi gives us an insightful and compelling reading of Camus the colonial *stranger*, as well as an account of what "escapes Said" in the latter's reading of Camus in *Culture and Imperialism*. Marrouchi's earlier work on Derrida's unresolved "Algerian" identity forecasts some of his rhetorical fire here in pursuit of a plainspeaking that is never gratuitous (he writes unguardedly, for example, of "Bhabha's verbosity," Camus' "lies," and Said as a "Mr. Fixit" in the eyes of his acolytes). If there are odd slips from time to time — he considers poststructuralism a "method of reinterpreting texts within their historical contexts" (195) — his writing is also confident, acerbic and original, and it is only one reason to consult this volume for its occasional insights.

It is instructive to think of how comparatively little attention in postcolonial circles is likely to go to another anthology published this year — Naseer Aruri and Muhammad A. Shuraydi's *Revising Culture, Reinventing Peace. The Influence of Edward Said* (Olive Branch Press, 2001, introduced by Richard Falk). The book does not have the same glossy production quality as the Bové volume, but it represents perspectives and information unavailable elsewhere to critics in the humanities. More important, it speaks truth to power.

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James Romm. *Herodotus*. With a forward by John Herington. Princeton, NJ: Hermes Books, 1998. Pp. xiv, 212. \$40.00, \$16.00 pb.

This is a rather precious little book in an utterly pretentious series, the brainchild of C. J. Herington, who begins his "Forward" by quoting