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Said, The World, the Text, and the Critic

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REVIEWS

EDWARD W. SAID. *THE WORLD, THE TEXT, AND THE CRITIC*.
CAMBRIDGE, MA: HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS,
1983. 327 pp. \$19.95.

Literary theory as currently practiced in the American academy finds itself at a difficult impasse: whatever insurrectionary implications Derrida and his followers may have portended in the early 1970s, post-structuralist theory is now solidly entrenched in the American academic power structure, and its rarefied discourse is as removed from historical realities as the New Criticism it displaced. New Criticism proclaimed literature to be an autonomous object in order to celebrate a universal humanism, an ahistorical transmission of "centered" moral values. Deconstruction, in eclipsing New Criticism as the dominant theoretical mode in this country, has retreated into an ahistorical labyrinth of "textuality," an operation which occurs at no particular place or time, and in which language refers to itself rather than historical circumstance. Textuality allows only misreadings and misinterpretations. History, according to the deconstruction theory, has become a series of anxieties of influence in which all moments of literary production betray the same aporias of thought, the same desire for a logocentric white mythology, the same naming and renaming of the abyss, and so on. Deconstruction, in practice, has replaced one synchronic formalism with another.

Edward Said is one of a handful of theorists attempting to insert the post-structuralist critique into an historicist methodology, radically to historicize literary theory. In the last decade, Said writes, "a precious jargon has grown up, and its formidable complexities ob-

scure the social realities that, strange as it may seem, encourage a scholarship of 'modes of excellence' very far from daily life in the age of declining American power" (p. 4). Contemporary theory, which Said refers to several times as the "new New Criticism," has become "worldless." Said argues for a methodology which, as the title suggests, places the production of a text, along with the enterprize of criticism itself, in their respective historical moments, connected to the "world." By "world," Said means the material conditions of *history*, a concept on which contemporary theory has largely turned its back.

Said's theoretical sympathies are mainly Marxist, yet he comes down especially hard on recent American "leftist" criticism for forfeiting its active, oppositional role in the academic power structure. He charges that "literary studies on the Left, far from producing work to challenge or revise prevailing values, institutions, and definitions, have in fact gone too long a way in confirming them" (p. 168). Marxist theory, as it has traveled from Georg Lukacs to Lucien Goldmann to Raymond Williams to Louis Althusser, has become lost in an ahistorical, asocial formalism. It no longer speaks of the relations of power and authority—it too has become tamed, a silent critic of the world.

The business of the critic, then, is to reestablish the relationship between the text, as a *material* object, and its historical means of production. Said's concept of history is no facile return to a history of ideas or to a linear periodization. History is not anthropomorphic. Said writes that "cultural events are not best understood as if they were human beings born on a certain day, the past itself is not a set of such births, and time does not move like a clock, in discrete moments" (p. 155). Rather, culture is a seamless web with an emergent past not reducible to periods and discursive traditions, one dying as another is born in linear succession.

Said passionately believes that the critic should attempt to recreate the bonds between texts and the world, to "give materiality back to...the strands holding the text to society, author, and culture" (p. 175). In short, Said emphasizes *reconstruction* rather than *deconstruction*, and he is one of a small group of theorists—Fredric Jameson and Frank Lentricchia also come to mind—trying revitalize the current state of literary theory. This is an important book.

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