

Irving Howe

## HISTORY AND LITERATURE

CULTURE AND IMPERIALISM, by Edward Said. Alfred A. Knopf, 1993. 380 pp. \$25.00.

**T**here are two Edward Saims. One is a literary scholar and critic, cultivated, knowledgeable, and, notwithstanding his interest in the literature of the third world, a traditionalist in taste. The other is a spokesman for the Palestinian cause and adherent of the PLO, polemical and sometimes, as happens in political disputes, strident. Now there is no necessary contradiction between the two, and it ought to be possible for one person to answer two callings. But in the bruising course of actuality, it's often hard to avoid confusions and blurrings of role. I say this not with hostile intent, but in recognition of the costs involved.

The two Saims alternate, sometimes fuse, throughout *Culture and Imperialism*. This new book is partly an indictment of imperialism—at times maddeningly repetitive and lacking in analytical rigor, but still, I think, largely right in its argument. In part, it is also a study of how imperialism left its mark on the cultures, especially the literatures, of the West—and here the writing is often keen and fresh.

The cultures of the West, argues Said, have been filled with explicit and tacit acceptance of imperialism as both historical phenomenon and ideological rationale. Embedded in the rationales for imperialism, continues Said, has been a strong current of racism, the notion that the “white man” is somehow, perhaps inherently, superior to peoples of color. And what is quite remarkable in looking back at Western culture is how little acknowledgment

has been made by literary critics and cultural historians of the impact of imperialism.

For his denunciation of imperialism Said has been attacked by hostile reviewers. Plugged in to the zeitgeist, they have dismissed Said's book as a mere repetition of “leftist” rhetoric or, a bit more charitably, as an assault upon something that has largely faded out of existence. These attacks are unwarranted. Notwithstanding occasional lapses into cant, Said is entirely right on this matter: imperialism was and remains a social evil denying the right of autonomy to millions of people. The rationales that too many intellectuals improvised in its behalf are indefensible. Nor is the fact that in many ex-colonies in Africa and the Middle East the withdrawal of imperial powers was followed by notoriously brutal local dictatorships a sufficient reason for nostalgia for “the good old days” of imperial rule.

Morally, then, Said's pages about the evils of imperialism are not to be faulted, even if we recognize that they might have been stronger had he included a few paragraphs about the Stalinist domination of Eastern Europe, arguably a version of imperialism, and about the role of the Arabs in the slave trade of Africa, also a version of imperialism.

Analytically, however, Said's section on imperialism is weakened by the absence of a coherent theoretical account of what he means by that term. It is not enough to point to Western domination of African and Middle Eastern countries. Is imperialism something that has persisted through the ages or is it to be seen as especially linked with recent history? Is the main impetus behind it a drive for economic gain (for example, Lenin's theory that modern imperialism is motored by a need to export surplus capital)? Is it inseparable from capitalist societies or a policy that some nations can choose to adopt and others not? Is it driven by an ineradicable hunger for power and therefore a force that social decision cannot stamp out? Is imperialism confined to the West or is it a universal phenomenon?

These are familiar but basic questions that should

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This review was written by Irving Howe shortly before he died in early May of this year.—Eds.

be confronted in a book such as Said has written. But they are not. As a result, imperialism becomes a sort of all-purpose term of condemnation, which would be quite OK for pamphleteering but not for serious work. (Said might have found a useful comprehensive survey of theories of imperialism in the late Henry Pachter's article in the Sept.-Oct. 1970 *Dissent*, though it may be too much to expect him to turn to this source. After all, a chap has to draw the line somewhere.)

Quite the best part of Said's book is a section in which he discusses the failure of traditional literary criticism, whether formalist or socially inflected, to deal with the presence of empire in nineteenth-century European and especially English fiction. Here Said makes a real contribution. I'm told that there has been a fair amount of specialized study recently that deals with this topic, but since I've not kept up with it I can't judge how much Said's discussion owes to previous scholars. The important thing, however, is that Said is the first influential critic to write extensively on this subject.

Said's own handling of it is uneven. Sometimes he presses too hard, and other times he stops too soon.

In a brief discussion of Dickens's *Great Expectations* he notes that Magwitch, the convict whom the central character, Pip, has helped many years earlier, now returns from Australia to England, a wealthy man intent upon enriching Pip. At the time this novel is set, Australia was a penal colony notorious for the hard life imposed on convicts sent from England. Said indicates—he isn't very clear about this point—that Dickens has somehow to be faulted for not considering the special nature of Australia as part of the English imperial system.

I think this criticism is not persuasive. *Great Expectations* finds its moral climax or thematic fulfillment in the final willingness, after much resistance, of the snobbish young Pip to accept Magwitch as a sort of surrogate father. The main concern of the novel is with the way a sense of moral fraternity can overcome barriers of social caste, and for this theme it barely matters where Magwitch has come from or how he has made his money. (Dickens's readers surely knew what Australia stood for.) What matters is the relationship between convict and young swell. Australia is, so to say, beyond the novel's boundary of relevance.

More cogent is the problem Said raises regarding Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. (He isn't the first to do so, though he fails to mention that.) In Jane

Austen's novel we are shown an early nineteenth-century country house in which a prosperous English gentleman, Sir Thomas Bertram, presides over a well-ordered, conservative style of life. As the novel opens, Sir Thomas has to visit the West Indies to look after his plantation, and during his absence some mildly disorderly events occur in the course of amateur theatricals arranged by his children. Only when Sir Thomas returns are things set aright. There are other plot lines, but these we must here neglect.

The business with Sir Thomas and the West Indies—his visit is not described, only mentioned—can leave a present-day reader with a feeling of uneasiness. Shown to be the right-thinking if somewhat rigid overseer of social order, Sir Thomas goes off to the West Indies at a time when slave labor dominated those islands, so that his estate must have been based on slavery. The central female character of *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price, even asks her uncle Thomas about the slave trade, but her question is met with a "dead silence."

The discomfort we may feel about this episode is likely to qualify the pleasure we take in reading this novel. But what degree of discomfort? Here the slave trade does fall within the novel's boundaries of relevance, as (in my opinion) Australia does not with regard to *Great Expectations*. The distinction I am suggesting between Dickens vis à vis Australia and Jane Austen vis à vis the West Indies cannot be sustained by hard-and-fast evidence; it is what in sports is called a judgment call (as so many opinions about literature must be). So it seems to me that what happened to Magwitch in Australia does not centrally shape his relationship with Pip—which is based on a memory of kindness enacted many years ago. But that Jane Austen's Sir Thomas draws his income from slaves while still being presented as an upright moral figure must affect our view of *Mansfield Park*.

Said describes acutely the problem of Sir Thomas's journey to the West Indies, yet he is also correct, I believe, in calling *Mansfield Park* a great novel. The two things—moral judgment and critical estimate—stand in his book side by side, as discrete observations. But I wonder how it is possible to advance the moral judgment without, to some degree, affecting the critical estimate. Although it would be foolish to allow our moral uneasiness about the West Indies reference to negate our admiration for this novel, it seems implausible that we can simply align moral judgment and critical estimate as separate observations and let it go at that. Said approaches this problem, indeed, brings his readers to it, but then fails to confront it head-on.

A similar difficulty arises regarding Said's sensitive analysis of Kipling's *Kim*. If Kipling in this novel accepts uncritically the benign role of British imperialism—and he does—how does that affect his marvelously sympathetic treatment of Indian life?

Said writes that “we are naturally entitled to read *Kim* as a novel belonging to the world's greatest literature, free to some degree from its encumbered historical and political circumstances.” Yes; but then he adds that “by the same token we must not unilaterally abrogate the connections [in the book] . . . to its contemporary actuality.” By “contemporary actuality” Said means that Kipling saw India, without hesitation, as rightly “part of the empire.” Said is on firm ground in saying that *Kim* should not be treated “reductively as imperialist propaganda,” but he fails, again, to consider the question: how does the acceptance of imperialism, more blatant in Kipling than in Jane Austen, affect our response to the novel? It's not that I have a quick or easy answer

to such questions, but in a book with Said's title such questions ought to be confronted.

Further in *Culture and Imperialism* there is a helpful chapter on fiction from third world cultures. And finally he ends with a somewhat ragged chapter acknowledging that many of the post-colonial nations, as these employ the slogans of nationalism and sometimes Marxism, have proved sadly disappointing to those who hoped for “liberationist” outcomes. Again, there is an attack on Western powers, especially the United States, for their recent dealings with “underdeveloped” countries. Much of this is pertinent, but it would be more so had Said remarked that the values he espouses are essentially those of the Enlightenment, a historical contribution of the West. The two Sais again seem a little uncomfortable with one another. Still, his espousal of “liberation,” vague as it is, seems attractive in this time of soured expectations. That he has trouble defining this “liberation” is a problem by no means confined to him. □

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