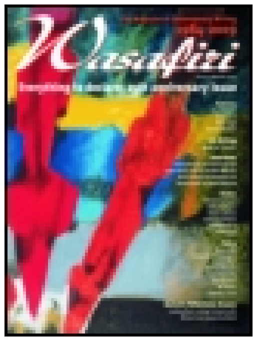

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Edward Said, Ireland and the Everyday

Declan Kiberd

War, civil war and the extreme situations of modern life create a challenge for a writer; how to remain an artist in the midst of such bitterness? Too often this challenge has been explained as one rooted in the need to avoid all semblance of propaganda; but it actually arises more from the felt need of artists to hold onto everyday values in the face of the abnormality all around them. The artist is in fact the ultimate citizen, who can evoke the ways in which a deeper, truer life somehow continues beneath the extreme surface of things.

Given that colonialism works not only by violence against the community whose land it occupies, but also by seeking to erase the traces of a native culture, the reassertion of the primacy of everyday values takes on a defiant cast. It was because of Yeats's ability to combine anti-colonial activity (as in founding an avowedly national theatre), along with the celebration of the quotidian realities of rural Irish life, that Edward Said could proclaim him one of the first modern poets of decolonisation, an inspiration to successors like Mahmoud Darwish and Pablo Neruda, who also knew about the struggle to remain poets in the face of dire provocation. Said understood that the English in Ireland wished not just to anglicise culture, but to transform the very landscape through which people moved into a simulacrum of the Home Counties. Yeats's early poems, which spiritualise that landscape with codes drawn from Celtic lore, thus take on a revolutionary aspect, as an attempt to clear the counter-space in which a restored daily life can be imagined, one that is serenely national rather than anxiously nationalist. Said found in Yeats's poems written between 1916 and 1923 not only the 'violence of horses' (Yeats, *Collected Poems* 236) and of 'weasels fighting in a hole' (Yeats, *Collected Poems* 233), but also the terrible, new beauty out of which a reimagined community might be born:

> His greatest theme, in the poetry that culminates in *The Tower* (1928), is how to reconcile the inevitable violence of the colonial conflict with the everyday politics of an ongoing national struggle, and also how to square the power of the various parties in the conflict with the discourse of reason, persuasion, organisation, and the requirements of poetry. (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 283)

By reconnecting the Irish to elements of their almost-erased lore and material culture, mythologies and narratives of self-explanation, Yeats was in effect seeking to restore the despised everyday world of field and farmhouse, hill and glen, and he found in discarded codes the vernacular energies of a risen people. Depicted in such a way, Yeats's project may be seen, perhaps for the first time, to be at one with James Joyce's in *Ulysses*, a work in which the dignity of the middle range of experience is asserted against the bogus glamour of imperial war-making. The ordinary, so Joyce said, was the proper domain of the artist, while the extraordinary could safely be left to journalists. This was, of course, a repudiation of some central tenets of nineteenth-century art which, from Baudelaire through Flaubert to the early modernists, excoriated the ordinary as bourgeois banal. The mentality of the soldiers who enlisted for British military service either in the trenches of the 1914–18 war or in the boreens of Ireland was itself a logical product of such diagnoses; they diced with death in order to heighten their sense of being alive. For Joyce this death-cult of the *blutbruderschaft* arose directly out of disillusionment with everyday life, and he seemed, like Yeats, convinced that there was a link between a more democratic politics and a belief in the perpetual dignity of people's quotidian practices. In making the central character of *Ulysses* an ordinary citizen of Jewish background, Joyce may have foreseen that the Jews were already becoming victims of the growing popular disenchantment with the complexities of modernity.

Joyce, however, also followed Yeats in taking a contrary line, one which, after the enormities of world war, would give heart to the surrealists. He believed that, by recording the minutiae of a single day, he could redeem those elements of the marvellous latent in repetition, so that the familiar might once again astonish. In the great cities of nineteenth-century Europe the status of everyday life had been much reduced, as repetitive work in factories took on the character of dull routine. Most

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persons were eventually so numbed as to be unable to perceive the malady, but artists like Baudelaire and Flaubert tried to bring them to a consciousness of it. 'Boredom is the everyday become manifest', Maurice Blanchot has written, 'and, consequently, the everyday after it has lost its essential, constitutive trait of being unperceived' (242). Yet the terrible history of the world from Peterloo to Verdun could still be undone; the everyday need not be average, but a process recorded as it was lived, with spontaneity and openness to chance.

For all their radical newness in the anti-imperial context thus sketched by Said, the methods of Yeats and Joyce were also a return to the aims of the English Romantic poets in the aftermath of the French Revolution. Joyce deliberately chose the dailiest kind of day as the antithesis of quotidian dullness. By recording the hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute variations in individuals, Joyce shows their selves in transformation. The very fact that no great events transpired on 16 June 1904 leaves the characters free to attend to their own thoughts as a discipline of self-exploration, rather than to process thoughts whose content and form have been dictated largely by others and by outside forces. At the same time, the everyday challenges exhausted notions of heroic value which had led directly to the carnage of empire and war.

Of course, such subtleties ran counter to the vulgarities of a war-making, heroic world, whose daily record is to be found in the shock-horror stories of newspapers rather than in a quieter domestic round. Hence Yeats's castigation of journalism as the orange-peel on the dusty stairs leading to the editor's door. Hence, also, Joyce's mockery of newspaper techniques in the counter-newspaper that is *Ulysses*. 'In the everyday, everything is everyday', observes Blanchot, 'but in the newspaper everything is strange, sublime, abominable' (243–44). Newspapers were *not* capable, as Yeats and Joyce were, of seizing the insignificance of the everyday, because their writers could not deal with what was hidden, only with the blatant and the obvious.

After the Last Sky, Said's text written to accompany photographs taken by Jean Mohr of Palestinian life under conditions of military rule, is yet another attempt on his part to describe the hidden everyday that persists beneath conditions of emergency. The technical problem to be surmounted in the text was one that Samuel Beckett had called 'pronoun trouble' — to write 'I' was hard, 'we' not much easier, and too often likely to collapse into 'you' or 'they'. As a stateless, scattered, dispossessed people, the Palestinians find it hard to evolve a narrative form which does simultaneous justice to the various levels of national life, especially a life that is as yet emergent, caught in the very condition of emergency. The Irish, like the Palestinians, whenever asked to explain their problem, also go right back, not just a few decades, but hundreds of years, in a futile search for some point of origin. Whereas the French or the English seem able to take their identity for granted, these people cannot.

The true history of such a people's existence is thus a secret history of underground life — told in Arabic songs and Gaelic poetry. Because they were forbidden for so long, these narratives are often broken, fragmented or occluded in codes which become mysterious even to those who are their bearers. Moreover, when the names of places are denied or removed, a people may ultimately feel that they are living, in a phrase used by Engels of the Irish, like strangers in their own country. Hence the love of patching and pasting in their artworks, whose apparent modernity of form is a direct effect of these crises. The cracked looking-glass of a servant necessarily reveals a multiple rather than singular self.

In such a dispensation time is never linear or orderly. Some elements of the community live to the clock of modernity, while others do not. Some are moved through time, while others master and move through it. Even a single individual, says Said, may have 'achieved an out-of-season maturity in one part of their body and mind while the rest remains childlike' (*After the Last Sky* 25). Such lives cannot be recognised, much less rendered, in received forms of literature or of the state, and so new forms must be generated to capture the strangeness, and these uncertain, atemporal identities.

The energy of everyday life is its desire, then, for new form, which partly explains the obsession with creating unprecedented shapes to a narrative. Said noticed in Palestinian codes a love of 'fragmentary compositions, and self-consciously staged testimonials in which the narrative voice keeps stumbling over itself, its obligations, its limitations' (*After the Last Sky* 38). That scruple arises from an honest admission of the difficulty of defining a new freedom — such freedom, as Beckett might say, that freedom is not the word. But it is also generated by the crowded nature of a space under occupation, in which almost every public utterance is designed not just to be heard but also overheard — heard in all its coded intensity by the natives, but also overheard by the more scrupulous sorts among the occupying regime, who may find in it a covert appeal to intervene and help. One long-term effect of such talking in metaphors is that a people may eventually devise too many codes for the avoidance of directly expressed emotion, for the avoidance of confrontation itself. Indeed, half of the jokes told by the Irish themselves are variations on that theme.

All of these effects are those of crowded living in a contested but small space. Even when intense feeling is expressed, its intensity is often in direct proportion to the narrowness: 'Out of Ireland we have come./Great Hatred, little room,/Maimed us at the start./I carry from my mother's womb/A fanatic heart.' (Yeats, 'Remorse for Intemperate Speech' in *Collected Poems* 370). It might be argued that the reports of the Congested Districts Board on the west of Ireland in the early twentieth century seem to anticipate the phrases used by Said in *After the Last Sky*:

> . . . think of Palestine as a small, extremely congested piece of land from which we have been pushed. Every effort we make to retain our Palestinian identity is also an effort to get back on the map. (62)

— but, of course, with the added humiliation of being made to feel like latecomers, among the most belated peoples of the modern world.

Although Said could never denounce insurrectionary violence, he warned constantly of the dangers of placing a culture on a permanent war footing. In this, he echoed the strictures of Douglas Hyde who warned the leaders of revivalist Ireland that they had made the supreme mistake of articulating a case for a separatist nation while throwing over most of these markers – a language, songs, dances, sports – which entitled Ireland to recognition as a distinct entity, as something more than an economic problem. The case for separatism had even been rather ludicrously made, Hyde complained, in the English language. One result of this thinning of the national culture in the period after the Famine was a fetishising of armed struggle, an elevation of the tradition of the fight over the thing fought for.

However, for all the rigour of his critique, Said can seem at times to sponsor contradictory ideals. Sometimes he extols the fragmented, deflected, non-linear forms of Palestinian expression, but on other occasions he can yearn for a master-narrative of self-explanation. This was something of which he must have been quite conscious, just as he was of the discrepancy in his writings between humanist decent-skinnery much indebted to Orwell, and an out-and-out anti-humanism that he cheerfully attributed to Foucault. Of course this contradiction was noted but, beyond being explained as a tactic, it went unresolved. In all likelihood it arose from a humiliated sense of the poverty of nationalist theory in an age when both Marxism and feminism offered much richer texts for contemplation:

> We have no dominant theory of Palestinian culture, history, society: we cannot rely on one central image (exodus, holocaust, long march): there is no completely coherent discourse adequate to us . . . the spaces here and there in our midst include but do not comprehend the past: they represent building without overall purpose, around an uncharted and only partially surveyed territory. Without a centre. Atonal. (Said, *After the Last Sky* 129)

For all the regret in that diagnosis, there is also a kind of quiet pride, an undertone of fascination with such a deconstructed, atonal state. But the fascination is only momentary. Said's reservations about postmodernism – that it offers no firm ground from which to resist – make even more sense if we can recognise that he saw his own culture as a dire example of postmodern straits:

> . . . it is possible to see us as radically focused outward, toward a centre of authority we do not ourselves provide. It is as if we have internalised the views of an outside authority, participated in *its* schemes . . . It could even be argued that we are too mobile and too adaptable. (Said, *After the Last Sky* 130)

If there is insufficient presence, then it becomes impossible to reshape the world into a coherent pattern, to survey the world rather than be surveyed by it.

The dominant suspicion of anti-colonial intellectuals is that their country is always about to be swallowed up and disappear, because the patterns of daily life are too weakly inscribed in a people forced constantly to bow down to forces outside themselves. Hence the crucial political and cultural value of Joyce's interior monologues. In the end the characters in Joyce's book care too little about the outside world even to spurn it, but they concern themselves deeply with an inner world which can never be fully appropriated or taken over. Of course, in all such interior monologues a mind is rehearsing a kind of civic freedom, remoulding the colonial city to a more personal standard of excellence and self expression. It is no coincidence that 1922, the year of Irish independence, was also the date of publication of *Ulysses*. Joyce himself had often fretted that his country might vaporise. An émigré intellectual like Said, he performed his own critical anthropology in some of the great cities of modernity, while worrying that his own land was about to disappear. Moreover, he anticipated Said in his sense that he was forever speaking before a tribunal, which sat to adjudicate the claims of his people. In one essay for a Triestine newspaper, Joyce adopted for tactical purposes the urbane tones of a central European and described the unjust murder-trial of a speechless defendant back in Ireland. 'The figure of this dumb-founded old man, a remnant of a civilisation not ours, deaf and dumb before his judge', he told readers, 'is a symbol of the Irish nation at the bar of public opinion' (Joyce 198). One reason for writing *Ulysses* – not necessarily the main one – may have been to demonstrate that such a place and such a culture as Ireland's really did exist, as a distinct and separate entity.

Joyce's problem was the one identified also by Said; how to express the sheer fluidity and instability of the national life in a form that would, nonetheless, be comprehensible to the arbiters of international order. Ireland was a precarious invention, a fiction which might yet be sufficiently imagined to become a fact, but in 1907 its people, like Said's later Palestinians, were estranged from their past, robbed of their full archive, in, but not of, many situations in which they found themselves. There were so many levels of the community experience to be comprehended, yet no single explanatory category — hence the exploded forms of *Ulysses*. Too mobile and too adaptable, the people were everywhere and nowhere. They were all trying to proclaim a new law in the language of the outlaw, to announce newness out of the mutations of the old.

A similar understanding lies behind the unexpectedly hopeful conclusion to *After the Last Sky*:

> . . . our experience belongs with that of the Americans, Jews, Irish, Cypriots, American blacks, Poles, American Indians, at those terrifying frontiers where the existence and disappearance of peoples fade into each other, where resistance is a necessity, but where there is also sometimes a growing realization of the need for an unusual, and to some degree, even unprecedented knowledge. (159)

This is the point at which Said returns to Yeats for an image of a civic life which might emerge from the violence of decolonisation. Although in 'Leda and the Swan' Yeats recalls an ancient war, the broken wall and burning roof are even more urgently images from the Irish civil war. Writing in 1923, Yeats was well aware that many among his readers might interpret the swan as an invading English occupier and the girl as a ravished Ireland. The poem might then be read as a study of the calamitous effects of the original rape of Ireland and of the equally precipitate English withdrawal. The final question thereby asks: when the Irish took over power from the departing occupier, did they also take on a civic, social understanding, the skills of self government (or 'knowledge')? The 'indifferent beak' in the poem might then be Yeats's judgement on the callous and irresponsible suddenness of an ill-planned imperial withdrawal.

At the centre of Said's project was a double aesthetic, based on the understanding that new forms arise as a result of ever more honest attempts to capture the varieties of human experience, and that those forms nevertheless resist the life depicted, since they contain an ideological surplus of utopian elements. These elements hint at other, better forms, which may yet be socially serviceable in an improved community. New styles, therefore, emerge in opposition to the outworn conventions of earlier periods.

It was because he had such reverence for the democratic dignity of everyday life that Said constantly resorted to the word 'secular' as a term of praise. His vision was very much of this world in all its materiality, but of this world raised and improved to a higher power. He wrote in a way that ordinary readers could understand, with the conviction that criticism itself was a part of the democratic debate in any civic society. His belief that intellectuals should not be specialist technicians but amateur debaters was itself rooted in the idea, perhaps derived from Raymond Williams, that a true democracy called for the dissemination of culture to all persons, rather than the right of this or that person to be able to recruit for this or that elite group of specialist scholars. Despite his costly clothes and avowed interest in high art, Said really did believe in accountability; he often quoted Joyce by saying that he would like to return to a freed country, but only so that he might become its first and foremost critic. Quite simply, the duty of the intellectual was to oppose all the forms which might be assumed by overweening authority.

Said could, of course, take his secularism to extremes. I recall, as we walked beside the river Nile in Cairo in the early 1990s, his muttering (to the outrage of my wife) 'These fucking veils everywhere, these fucking veils.' At times, he seemed to have blinded himself to the fact that these same veils offered some women a mask behind which to explore alternative modes of freedom (much as Fanon said that the cloak did in Algeria, or much as Spenser complained about the function of the mantle in Elizabethan Ireland). Yet one of the paradoxes of Said's career was that, in his late book of lectures, posthumously published under the title *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, he celebrated Christianity as the first cultural code to embrace 'everyday human or worldly life as something to be represented through a style proper to it' (59).

In Said's view, democracy epitomised a moment when ordinary people might learn how to do extraordinary things; but it is anticipated by the radical intuition of the Christian story, which shows humble fishermen becoming founders of a new order, whose sheer interiority will destroy the Roman *imperium*. The exaltation of those once low over those considered most high is a recurrent theme of the Gospels, whether in the tale of the widow's mite or in the life of Simon Peter himself. In *Ulysses*, the mystic poet George Russell is heard to remark that visions to shape a world revolution may have their origins in a peasant's hut on a hillside. At the time the controversies surrounding Jesus seemed a little local difficulty in a remote province of the Roman Empire, but they really beckoned in a new age. 'The Birth of a spiritual movement in the depths of the common people from within contemporary life', Said remarks, was 'something which neither the poets nor the historians of antiquity set out to portray' (*Humanism and Democratic Criticism* 99). Even Christian authors themselves were slow to register the implications for literary narrative — the ending of a division between a high, exalted style for gods or nobles and a low, everyday style for the comic mundane. The problem was to hit upon a new register in which the ordinary had dignity and might even be depicted in the act of becoming extraordinary. In some ways Joyce's Leopold Bloom, then, or even the Parisian surrealists' release of the marvellous energies latent in rejected things, might be seen as the final implementation of the new Christian programme at the level of personality or form.

Said was interested in the ways in which newness comes into the world. It comes as a result of resistance to old styles, old forms — as part of the attempt to capture reality ever more fully. His obsession with moments of emergence, implicit in the very title *Beginnings*, allowed him to ask, however ironically, where the start of a discourse might be found. Colonies had become states, which then fissured into many different states, all in his own lifetime. Attempts to homogenise these defiant differences did no service to anybody. What were needed were new forms, state equivalents to the modernist novel, which took the conflicting styles as the very basis of their reimagined structure. The replacement of filiative by affiliative states was one way out of the trap; to choose your past, your parents, your career history, rather than just be chosen and constructed by them. This was the wisdom of a modern art which allowed persons to become the self-invented children of their own writings. Such art recognised that history is never a mere background to human relations, but one of their conditioning factors and that, unless a movement creates a sense of the dignity of its own everyday life, it can never escape the nightmare. Insofar as there is a better future to be shaped, it must be latent in the grace with which ordinary people persist in living their lives, however extreme the background situation. The problem was not how to think up amazing plots; rather it was to find forms equal to the astonishing qualities of everyday life. Most writers in normal societies had to add radiant details to make their work believable, but people in an occupied territory all too often

found that they had to tone the details of everyday life *down* in order to be credible.

Why did Said so extol 'the everyday'? The ultimate answer is given in his autobiography, *Out of Place*, his record of a lost world in which, split between Arabic and English but at home in neither, he never felt quite in command of his own experience. His English-language schools projected a heroic world of Kings – John, Alfred, Canute – which never connected with that of the streets all around him. Only in the performance of plays did he find the sense that someone could be at once exceptional and ordinary. His nine-year-old friend Micheline Lindell took the role of Alice in Lewis Carroll's masterpiece and what struck Said was 'how easily she glided between being one of us; average, humdrum, uninteresting, to being a creature with so unmistakeable an aura of glamour and elevation' (*Out of Place* 47).

Perhaps the problem for Said was epitomised even more emphatically by the self-repression of his father, a self-denial so deep as to cause a nervous breakdown, despite the man's business success. The father, like Micheline Lindell, is seen as both a fallible, time-bound creature and also as someone who transcends his immediate moment, introducing typewriters and modern business methods to a sleepy Third World Cairo still caught in old-style peddling and colonial economics. Once again, the problem is that the preferred forms of schooling are projecting an already obsolete world, that of the British Empire, whose deficiencies can only awaken in the mutinous youth a longing for more appropriate forms. Yet, when he is sent to the United States, he is made even more deeply aware of the ways in which a mass culture can, like the imperialism which preceded it, prevent the emergence of an art of everyday living. The existence of other languages, which had left the boy feeling at home in none, was preferable in the end to a monoculture reflective only of:

> the extraordinary homogenising power of American life, in which the same TV, clothes, ideological uniformity, in films, newspapers, comics etc. seemed to limit the complex intercourse of daily life to an unreflective minimum in which memory has no role. (Said, *Out of Place* 233)

The paradox coiled in these lines is clear by the time they are enunciated; the practice of everyday life, though often hidden, is even more intense under conditions of coercion, to which it is an instinctual mode of resistance. The everyday was no lost paradise, but rather the improvisations in which a people under occupation or eviction tried to remind themselves of the values in whose name they resisted dictation. That its attainment should come to seem as miraculous on the streets of Paris or Beirut as in the suburbs of Zamalek or Morningside Heights is a measure of just how deep was the degradation of the middle range of experience by the forces which made not only classic culture, but also the nineteenth century. The culture of democracy – one which celebrated ordinary people working, speaking and playing in a common language – was still a culture of beginnings, of preludes and overtures to a melody yet to be fully felt or performed.

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