

Reflections on a Patrician Radical

by Theodore Dalrymple



Anyone who watches the last recorded interview that Edward Said gave will feel great sympathy for the man. Still urbane and fluent, he was so wracked by his long disease that was soon to kill him, and so evidently suffering, that he could not even listen any longer to his beloved music, let alone play the piano, which he had always done with talent and skill early in his life, having considered a career as a professional musician.

There were other reasons for longer-term sympathy for the

radical academic and founder of “postcolonial” studies, whose life is chronicled in Timothy Brennan’s new [*Orientalism*](#), for which Said is most famous, and without which a biography would probably not have been commissioned. The criticisms are that the book is muddled, incoherent, inaccurate, and self-contradictory—as well as malicious, of course, but malice is not in itself a refutation of its arguments. The biographer suggests that the criticisms are trivial and beside the point: but if incoherence, inaccuracy, and self-contradiction are not important criticisms, it is difficult to know what important criticisms could be.

I am sure that if I had known Edward Said personally, I should have liked and perhaps admired him. But he did enormous harm with crass statements such as the following: “It is therefore correct that every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric.”

Thus speaks the precursor, or if you like the St John the Baptist, of Robin DiAngelo. Said projected his self-hatred onto the whole of the west and its history: the important question is why so many in the west were willing and eager to have it projected on to them and make it their own.

This book does not even ask the question. One of the blurbs on the rear cover of the book calls Said one of the greatest intellects of our time. If so, it reflects more on our time than on Said, just as this book reflects the state of the humanities in our universities.

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