

Bruce Robbins

Solidarity and Worldliness: for Edward Said

by
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In one of my last conversations with Edward Said, I told him I had arranged to speak at the upcoming Modern Language Association meeting (December 2003) on *Dreaming of Palestine*, the notorious novel about the Intifada by a 15-year-old Egyptian-Italian girl named Randa Ghazy.¹ He said, with his usual bluntness: “It’s a terrible novel, isn’t it?” I could not disagree—in general I had trouble disagreeing with him even when I wanted to. But I said I thought that whatever its aesthetic value, the novel was nevertheless interesting for the scandal it had caused. Taking the Palestinian side, to some European readers, seemed identical with teaching hatred and violence to children. And it was interesting for the “authenticity” issue raised by Ghazy not being Palestinian, not having lived in Palestine/Israel, and having found out what was going on in the Intifada largely from television. To invoke the vocabulary of high school, which there is extra reason to invoke here, this is the irritatingly persistent issue of the wannabe: wanting to be a Palestinian, wanting to join someone else’s revolution, and the sorts of gut-level resistance that any such desire seems to confront even from those who do not consider themselves champions of authenticity. Thinking back to the LeCarré novel about another Palestinian sympathizer, one might call this the “Little Drummer Girl syndrome”: the universal contempt on all sides for the one who is free to choose sides, but is not rooted in either, and thereby threatens to display the radical contingency of even the most rooted identity and commitment.²



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One of Edward Said's many achievements as a thinker is that he helped create intellectual conditions in which commitments like Ghazy's would have a better chance of seeming normal and proper. His impatience with biologically-based metaphors like rootedness was of course programmatic. In exhorting Western-located intellectuals to transcend the unthinking chauvinism hidden away in disciplinary comfort zones and innocent-seeming habits of interpretation, he asked us in effect to submit ourselves to a practice of modernist estrangement, a worldly version of asceticism. That is why he quoted over and over the words of the twelfth-century monk Hugo of St. Victor: "The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land."³ These words help us credit Randa Ghazy with a strength: her ability to treat another soil as her native one. (This is something she also does, in a more difficult sense, by writing into Israel/Palestine the somewhat different complications of her own ethnically-hyphenated Italianness.)

And yet the political valence of this gesture is anything but clear. There is an obvious tension between Said's credo of intellectual detachment and the political struggle to retrieve a homeland. Was exile a desirable condition, necessary to the most rigorous intellectual endeavor, or was it the result of a particular dispossession that could and should be made right by a return to a literal or metaphorical homeland—that should and would disappear with, say, the creation of a viable Palestinian state? I would argue that this question was never resolved in Said's work. Part of the secret of Said's charismatic presence is that he seemed to solve in his own being a paradox or contradiction for which there is perhaps no purely intellectual resolution. But it was in this zone of tension or contradiction that Said was most productive, both intellectually and politically. And Randa Ghazy's novel might be considered a characteristic manifestation of it.

DREAMING OF PALESTINE, A POLITICALLY-ENGAGED NOVEL by a 15-year-old, is something more than a striking anomaly or freak of culture, like a four-year-old skateboarder with a professional contract. Inspired, Ghazy has said, by media coverage of the shooting of the 12-year-old Palestinian Mohammad Al-Dorra, the crouching, terrified boy whose father tried and failed to save him from the bullets in a filmed sequence that no one who saw the images will ever forget, the novel does indeed have much to do with

children, and with media, and its associations with children and media help explain its political and aesthetic accomplishment. For one thing, it presents the violence of the Intifada both as a political necessity and as an issue within what has to be called the “family.” A surrogate father who has himself been intensely involved in the Intifada at one point finds himself screaming at a child who has lost his family and now wants violent revenge. The Israeli provocations and the inevitable Palestinian responses to them are presented as destroying families, and this destruction of the family is presented in turn with a teenager’s characteristic ambivalence: alongside other things, there is a clear and forceful *enjoyment* of the parents’ absence and of the opportunity or necessity of children therefore taking over the parental role. What we see is indeed something of a dream, the familiar Peter-Pan dream of children constructing and sustaining a do-it-yourself home for a family of homeless children. There seems little if any nostalgia for the lost world of the parents. There *is* some explicit desire for the surrogate attention of the television cameras. One might say that, with hesitation and reluctance, Ghazy makes a virtue out of an unpleasant historical necessity— in something of the same way that Said does with the discourse of homelessness and exile.

I cannot claim to know much about Palestinian literature. I would not have accepted the invitation to speak about it if I had not felt that the interest of getting the Intifada and the plight of the Palestinian people onto the program of the MLA was more important than the potential embarrassment a public display of my ignorance might be to myself. But in the little time I was able to devote to looking around in this interesting field, one thing I was struck by was the frequency of its references to land. And references to land provide a useful backdrop to what I was just saying about homelessness. In “Arabic Prose and Prose Fiction After 1948,” one of the essays in the *Reflections on Exile* volume, Said quotes the opening sentences of Ghassan Kanafani’s *Men in the Sun*, in which a character lays his chest on the ground and immediately feels the earth begin to throb: “a tired heart’s beats, flooding through the sand grains, seeping into his very innermost being” (51).⁴ Kanafani’s novel is also quoted in a fine book by the geographer Barbara McKean Parmenter entitled *Giving Voice to Stones: Place and Identity in Palestinian Literature*.⁵ Parmenter cites a novel by Jabra ibrahim Jabra which sees Israeli irrigation projects as “unnatural, mechanized intrusions which aid and abet Israel’s usurpation of the land” (81). She also cites various poems in which “the poet becomes the land personified, thirsting for redemption” (82). Palestinian authors, Parmenter concludes, “enlist nature in general, and the land in particular, as their last and strongest ally. Whereas the Israelis establish their

place by transforming nature—draining swamps, irrigating arid lands, and building cities—Palestinian writers cling to the indigenous landscape and its relict features for inspiration and support” (79).

The Zionists have of course used a rhetoric of indigeneity as well, pretending (in Said’s words) that “Palestine had stood still in time and was theirs . . . despite millennia of history and the presence of actual inhabitants” (8). Covering Jerusalem “entirely with symbolic associations,” this rhetoric has “totally obscur[ed] the existential reality of what as a city and real place Jerusalem is” (8). But this does not mean it is in the interest of the Palestinians to respond in kind. Robert Stone, in conversation with the Palestinian writer Raja Shehadeh, describes Zionist rhetoric about the land, written from a European distance, as a sort of “pornography” of place-names. And Shehadeh decides that he too is becoming a pornographer:

Sometimes, when I am walking in the hills...unselfconsciously enjoying the touch of the hard land under my feet, the smell of thyme and the hills and trees around me, I find myself looking at an olive tree, and as I am looking at it, it transforms itself before my eyes into a symbol...of our struggle, of our loss. And at that very moment I am robbed of the tree; instead there is a hollow space into which anger and pain flow (87).

He knows the Israelis are responsible for this anger and pain, but Shehadeh nevertheless laments and resists being forced to have, as he says, “a political pornographer’s eye for this land” (88).

In much the same vein, Parmenter argues that, in Palestinian literature, “the creation of this symbolic landscape and its accompanying rhetoric is problematic” (83). She knows that one reason for all these land references was Israeli censorship during the Intifada: “The olive tree is a convenient means of signifying Palestine without using the actual word” (79). Yet “metaphors of sexual union between male authors and the female land are not likely to resonate with Palestinian women” (84). One understands the ambiguity of “stones” in Parmenter’s title: on the one hand, stones stand for the land; on the other, they are weapons in a struggle without which it is quite possible that there would not be the flickers of hope for peace we are now seeing. But as weapons against an occupying army, the stones could be *any* stones. They could even be televised images. For Parmenter, it’s the

Zionists' own "land rhetoric" (84)—of heroic pioneers making the desert bloom— that has "forced Palestinian writers to move in the opposite direction" (84-85). But her implication is that they have moved *too far* in this direction: toward land as a figure for that which does not and should not change.

Shifting from literature to politics, what are the consequences of imagining land in this way? The peace process, to the extent that there is one, or at least to the extent that this process is represented by the recent Geneva Accords, depends on a swap between full Palestinian right of return to the land and some sort of compensation. It depends on land being at least partly exchangeable. To put this crudely and amorally: the more the issue is framed in terms of Palestinian rootedness in the land, the less likely the peace process as presently defined is to succeed.

In political terms, the Intifada in the Occupied Territories can be seen as two quite different things. On the one hand, it is heroic resistance against an occupying army, intended to drive army and settlers out and drive the government of Israel to negotiate in good faith. On the other hand, it is a metaphor for the struggle against the Israeli state itself, intended not merely to drive Israelis back inside their pre-1967 borders but to destroy the Israeli state, at least in its present form as an ethnically-inflected Jewish state in which Palestinians are second-class citizens. Justice in the abstract would seem to favor the second option. To demand an end to the house demolitions and the bulldozing of orchards, the construction of the Wall, the armed settlements in the Occupied Territories that began after 1967 and have never stopped expanding is all well and good, one might say, but it is not to address the primal and perhaps traumatic indignity of colonization. On the contrary, it is to neglect this primal or primary moment and, by emphasizing instead a later and secondary injustice, to point toward a zone of possible resolution— a resolution in which, to put it bluntly, the Israelis would remain, and Israel would remain a Jewish state. Since 1988, this has been the dominant Palestinian position. In effect, Palestinian leaders have declared that the primal injustice done to their people, the theft of their territory, cannot be the sole or decisive basis of a political solution. Too much time has gone by, too many new roots have been put down, too many alternative options that once seemed open have now closed up. There is a politically measurable difference between lands seized in 1948 and lands seized in 1967.

Whatever is eventually decided about the right of return, about one state or two, and if two then about the size and shape of the Palestinian state, the settlement when reached will involve Jews and Arabs sharing the land of the historic mandate. As in the case of other indigenous peoples and their treatment by other colonizers, factoring the passage of time into the political equation means tacitly accepting and legitimating an earlier act of injustice. The general principle here is subversive of all principles claiming to exist outside of time: even an act as politically unambiguous as colonial expropriation cannot retain the right in perpetuity to dictate political rights and wrongs.

Politics in the humanities has too often been a means by which we have anchored ourselves, trauma-like, against the ambiguities and dilemmas generated by life in time. In this sense our politics has tended to be untimely and, to recall Edward Said's ever-pertinent expression, unworldly. This was not Said's own way. He never allows us to think as if "time had stood still"; "actual inhabitants" count, even when they are the wrong actual inhabitants. I have never met anyone who was more ready to face the risks of worldliness in this sense. In his contribution to an anthology called *The Landscape of Palestine*, Said expresses his trademark refusal to join into what he calls, with studied neutrality, a "nationalist effort premised on the need to construct a desirable loyalty to and insider's knowledge of one's country, tradition, and faith" (4).⁶ What is so striking in this essay is his inability to speak of this process with the enthusiasm that will be required, even later in the same essay, when he stops illustrating the process with examples from the US and Israel and turns instead to the Palestinians who are the subject of the book. Arriving finally at the Palestinians, he speaks of their collective memory in neutral, processual, constructionist terms that might apply equally well to Orientalism: as "a field of activity in which past events are selected, reconstructed, maintained, modified, and endowed with political meaning" (13). What he calls the "dialectic of memory over territory" (9) seems to work equally well for nationalism and for imperialism. And that is perhaps one more reason why, while lamenting the fact that "Israel's heroic narrative of repatriation and justice obliterated any possibility of a Palestinian narrative" (12), he arrives at the following conclusion: "Israelis and Palestinians are now so intertwined through history, geography, and political actuality that it seems to me absolute folly to try and plan the future of one without that of the other" (19).

For purposes of comparison, consider Thomas Friedman's best-seller about globalization, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*. Friedman explains the second half of his title metaphor by saying that in the Middle East, where he used to report the news, people are still "fighting over who [owns] which olive tree" (31). He describes the olive tree with a degree of sentimentality that may sound surprising in such a champion of Lexus-style globalization: "Olive trees are important. They represent everything that roots us, anchors us, identifies us and locates us in this world— whether it be belonging to a family, a community, a tribe, a nation, a religion, or, most of all, a place called home. (...) We fight so intensely at times over our olive trees because, at their best, they provide feelings of self-esteem and belonging that are as essential for human survival as food in the belly. Indeed, one reason that the nation-state will never disappear, even if it does weaken, is because it is the ultimate olive tree—the ultimate expression of whom we belong to—linguistically, geographically and historically" (31). This is a recipe for unending conflict— conflict of a sort that U.S.-style globalization perhaps stands to benefit from.

The downside of olive trees, Friedman concedes, is "the exclusion of others" (32). He does not see, of course, that in many of the world's hot spots, arguably including the Middle East, such exclusions are new rather than old and are sustained if not produced by globalization. He does not see, so to speak, that Lexus factories produce olive trees. To make this point is to open up the possibility of a slightly more hopeful interpretation of globalization's real causal force in that world. It opens up the possibility that if globalization cannot be successfully opposed by olive-tree attachments like religion and the nation-state, it *can* perhaps be opposed by new principles of solidarity that arise in its very midst, that did not pre-exist it, but that can be used to control and redirect it. Principles of solidarity like Ghazy's.

Mohammed Bamyeh, writing in the most recent issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, quotes the American diplomat John Foster Dulles from 1954: "The Palestinian problem will be solved . . . only when a new generation of Palestinians grow up with no attachment to the land" (830).⁷ The most terrible irony of this quotation is that, on a certain level, Bamyeh agrees with it. He credits the effort of the Intifada with putting the Palestinians "on the political map" (831), but he also criticizes the formula "land for peace" and "the fixation on territoriality" more generally (833). Instead of thinking about maps and land, he says, we must all think about "*justice*" (833). Justice, as he explains it, indicates both more and less than a return to the land. Return is not literal but metaphorical: of "the majority of diaspora population, who

never saw Palestine, one may ask the question: How does one 'return' to what one never experienced?" (841). This metaphorical turn is both bravely experimental and profoundly worldly. It entails a willingness to explore "an uncharted landscape of joint sovereignties, half-states, multiple citizenships, mixed identities, and open traffic" (833). It does not mean Bamyeh is satisfied (why should he be?) to translate the right of return into financial "compensation," which is one of the suggestions of the Geneva Accord. But what he insists on adding is surprisingly inexpensive: "admission of wrongdoing or culpability in causing injustice" (842). The gesture of giving so much worldly weight to a mere act of speech, and thus factoring the rigors of exile into the very moment of homecoming, is worthy of Said. One would like to imagine an Israeli government that could see it has a bargain here and snap it up.

Notes

¹ Randa Ghazy, *Dreaming of Palestine*, trans. from the Italian by Marguerite Shore (NY: George Braziller, 2003)

² See my "American Intellectuals and Middle East Politics: An Interview with Edward W. Said," *Social Text* 19/20 (1988), 37-53. Reprinted in Gauri Viswanathan, ed., *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said* (NY: Pantheon, 2001), 223-242.

³ See for example Said's *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 185.

⁴ As it turns out, the earth in question is located in Iraq, not Palestine, and the sense of displacement in time as well as space is the Palestinian reality or experience which Said is interested in reflecting on, but the center is a sense of connection to the earth.

⁵ Barbara McKean Parmenter, *Giving Voice to Stones: Place and Identity in Palestinian Literature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

⁶ Edward W. Said, "Palestine: Memory, Invention, and Space," in Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, Roger Heacock, and Khaled Nashef, eds. *The Landscape of Palestine: Equivocal Poetry* (Birzeit University, 1999).

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⁷ Mohammed Bamyeh, "Palestine: Listening to the Inaudible," in *Palestine America*, a special issue edited by Mohammed Bamyeh, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 102:4 (Fall 2003), 825-849.