

The obituaries and written memories of Edward Said that appeared in papers and journals shortly after his death all share a great number of common details about the man, however, parts of his life are exemplified more in some articles than in others. In some cases, two obituaries may even state completely contrasting opinions of Said. These obituaries of Said should not be taken as lightly as a simple summation of a man's life, rather, one should view them with a degree of criticism. In such obituaries, partiality on behalf of writers, editors, or newspapers as a whole can often lead to a misrepresentation of who someone is. While we may expect to find an author's opinions in a book review or editorial, we may not think of an obituary as a writing space for bias, rather, we expect a summary of a person's life. We may demand an accurate account of how things happened in order to make fair judgments on our own, but what we get are formulations of a newspaper columnist or editor. This can be particularly problematic for someone like myself, who reads the obituaries to get the quickest and most fact packed summation of a person's life. Instead of gaining clear insight into Said's life, I learned of twisted accounts of who he was through the viewpoints of biased newspapers.

Said's audience is vast, and many who write about him claim to know him well. But how well can we really know a person, and how unbiased can we actually write a description of this person? These are rather subjective and philosophical questions to ask. To know Said could mean a number of things. Authors may often employ the strategy of claiming to know the author they are critiquing or citing. This helps to bring an element of justification to their use of that author's work. One may claim to have known Said through his efforts on behalf of a cause, through personal dealings with him, or through

extrapolations of his articles and books. On the other hand, one may cite Said without acknowledging who he is in order to bend his image in support of one's argument. It is nearly impossible to formulate an accurate representation of such a widely discussed character like Said, however, one need not draw upon anything more than his reputation to give off the illusion that he is omnisciently standing behind things much larger than him, things like Palestinian independence/coexistence or post-colonial studies. In short, anyone who writes about Said or cites him is clearly rearranging facts in the manner that they understand him. Even though his books and literary contributions will live on as he wrote them, his reputation as formulated by his audience will trump Said in the end.

Obituaries were the first sources to which I turned for an understanding of who Said was, and though I compiled a relevant amount of facts, I found more often that the culmination of details and opinions about him clouded my understanding of what this man stood for. *The New York Times* was the first source I consulted and was the first to make me question the objectivity of an obituary. In one paragraph Richard Bernstein states that "he was an unaffiliated member of the Palestine National Council, a parliament in exile", which is a simple fact without bias, however, it continues to describe the members of the council as:

belong[ing] to one of the main Palestinian organizations, most importantly to Yasir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization, but some belonged to smaller organizations believed responsible for terrorist operations against Israelis and Americans, such as George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. (Bernstein 1)

Here he is described as an *unaffiliated* member, yet by going on to list in a lengthy sentence the scruples of the council's other members (i.e. their connections to the PLO and Popular Front), it alludes to an affiliation and connection that seems to overpower the word

*unaffiliated*. From this segment we learn more about the politics of the *New York Times* and/or the author of this obituary than we do about Said. Obviously they must not agree with him, for they are doing their best to portray him in a negative light. This is a misleading paragraph, and for someone who knows little about him, it builds up a false image of Said.

Like *The New York Times* but in a different fashion, the *Electronic Intifada* portrays Said mostly in relation to his work with the Palestinian struggle. His obituary here concludes his life by saying that "[u]ntil the very end of his life, he was actively engaged in the Palestinian National Initiative, a movement to mobilize the energy of the entire population towards a non-violent struggle for peace and liberation" ("Remembering Edward Said" 2). Yet the *Guardian* concludes differently, saying that "[i]n his final years, Said's health grew ever more fragile, and, though passionately concerned with the unfolding Palestinian disaster in the wake of 9/11 and the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, he took a conscious decision to withdraw from political controversy and channel his energies into music"(Ruthven 8). Obviously the *Electronic Intifada*, a Palestinian political webzine of sorts, would be expected to conclude Said's life by putting in a plug for the PNI, but that this statement contradicts the *Guardian's* depiction of his last few years seems all too biased. On the other hand, if he did put up a fight to the bitter end, why then does the *Guardian* choose to depict his end as one dedicated to music and not politics? Clearly the authors of these articles have the facts about Said at hand, however, instead of presenting them as be, they choose to emphasize certain aspects to project a different image of who Said was.

Delving further, I found an obituary and a book review for Edward Said by

Christopher Hitchens, a columnist for *Vanity Fair*, who with Said co-edited *Blaming the Victims: Spurious Scholarship and the Palestine Question*. Hitchens professes to have known Said, and he makes his judgments of him seem justified because of this fact. He makes just such a criticism by saying:

I knew and admired him for more than a quarter-century, and I hope I will not be misunderstood if I say that his moral energy wasn't always matched by equivalent political judgment. Indeed, it should be no criticism of anyone to say that politics isn't their best milieu, especially if the political life has been forced upon them. ("Remembering Edward Said" 2)

Hitchens may admire Said, but he plays down Said's political opinions. It seems they had trouble getting along with each other due to their opposite stances on Iraq. He even says, "I simply had to stop talking to him about Iraq over the past two years" ("Remembering Edward Said" 4). He makes such patronizing statements about Said in this obituary, and they seem to hold, due to a sense of reliance on Hitchens as knowing the "real deal" about Said. Objectively though, this could also be perceived as a form of slander brought on by their falling out over the Iraq conflict. In an article titled "Where the Twain Should Have Met", Hitchens writes about his personal accounts of Said and the book *Orientalism*. The same style of having personally known Said permeates through this critique. It makes his opinions about the man seem all the more reliable, yet something is strange. In reading this, I picked up on an undertone of Hitchens' obsession with Iraq and Saddam Hussein. At one point Hitchens criticizes Said's statement that the West has historically had a false account of the East. Hitchens states the corollary, "I am willing to bet that I know more about Mesopotamia than Saddam Hussein ever knew about England, France or the United States. I also think that such knowledge as I have comes from more disinterested sources" ("Where the Twain Should Have Met" 2). It is interesting that Hitchens decides to throw in

Saddam Hussein as his counter-argument, especially since this is a topic of great contention for them. What is an audience supposed to make of this? Hitchens is supporting his political views in a book review of *Orientalism*, a book review that continually makes personal judgments about Said. It is heavily opinionated and the whole irony is sickening. Yes, this strategy of showing oneself to be "buddy-buddy" with another author while affronting his political views certainly makes it seem like Hitchens is the dominant and wiser of the two men, his admiration of Said notwithstanding. Hitchens is very argumentative in all his articles and books, and by citing personal accounts he gains an aura of respect, reliability, and authority on the matter of Said's life. Luckily, there are other less biased personal accounts of Said out there, and Hitchens personal views will retain less weight proportionally.

The statement by Stanley Kurtz before the House of Representative's Subcommittee on Select Education, in the hearing "International Programs in Higher Education and Questions About Bias", shows a striking example of how Said's work could be twisted inside out. Kurtz argues that Title VI of the Higher Education Act funds studies of post-colonial theory which in its nature is anti-American and thus should not be funded. The bulk of his argument is supported by a single paragraph:

Post colonial theory was founded by Columbia University professor of comparative literature, Edward Said. Said gained fame in 1978, with the publication of his book, *Orientalism*. In that book, Said equated professors who support American foreign policy with the 19th century European intellectuals who propped up racist colonial empires. The core premise of post-colonial theory is that it is immoral for a scholar to put his knowledge of foreign languages and cultures at the service of American power. (Kurtz 2)

Kurtz basically takes Said's equivocation of American foreign policy to European support of colonialism and turns it into a definition of post-colonial theory, that academia should

refuse to support America. Kurtz not only got it all wrong and misrepresented Said's argument in *Orientalism*, but he makes it sound as if Said is the only person who writes about post-colonialism. The irony here lies in the fact that Kurtz is able to label Said as un-American through false representation of his work. Kurtz did this in order to stop the funding of Title VI and transfer the education in foreign languages and culture to the auspices of the D.O.D., while labeling Said and research in post-colonialism as "un-American". Seeing that Said is deceased, he can no longer argue against those who misuse/misrepresent his works or his reputation.

The fact is that no true representation of Said can be conceived of and accurately shown, because neither his audience nor his acquaintances in academia know him the same way. Those who write about him or cite him will probably never show Said the way he truly is without first bending him to their perceptions. In effect, we learn much more about the views of the authors who write about Said than we do about Said himself. For example, my research of Said led me to learn much more about Christopher Hitchens. In order to find out who Said was, I could not simply pull up a single obituary. I read through many articles and accounts of Said from an entire spectrum of political thought. It was necessary to pull out the facts and separate them from the opinions. I had to read carefully, as not to let the author's view of Said get mixed up with my research. For all intents and purposes, the only way I accomplished this was by reading various articles about him from many different sources. Had I stuck with one or two articles for carrying the most convincing views of Said, I may have come to the conclusion that he was a terrorist or traitor to society. While this may be one view of Said, these characteristics are certainly not reflected in his writings, nor do they fairly portray the actions he took in life and why he chose to do them.

At best, one should stick to reading Said to get the best understanding of who he was. He is the only person who can correctly represent himself. We should not necessarily exclude reading critiques and responses to his works, however, these should be read as additional materials. In this way, we broaden our understanding of who loves and hates Said, and more importantly, why. If time does not allow for such extensive reading, then one should at least make an effort to diversify sources and watch for skewed depictions of Said.

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