

When Said Met Genet

JAMES R. CURRIE

My statements here are a meditation upon the form that Said's thinking praxis developed at a loaded moment of its exercise in the last 10–15 years of his life, when questions started to develop in his work regarding knowledge. Problems regarding how knowledge comes into being exist across the board in Said's oeuvre. Much of what I address was already looming as early as 1975 in *Beginnings*, Said's second published book.⁸² Nevertheless, the way in which these difficulties make their pressure felt in Said's later work bespeak urgency in a different register, and it is to such issues emerging at a moment of danger that I turn my attention, since they are relevant, I argue, to what musicology can contribute to debate concerning Said's legacy.

During the last period of his life, Said's work gets caught up in the frustrations of an antagonism between knowledge and temporality that we can frame via the famous formulation of the knowledge/temporality conundrum in the preface to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Hegel asserts that our understanding of the world 'always comes on the scene too late'. Philosophy, 'as the thought of the world, appears only when reality has completed its formative process, and made itself ready'. And so 'when philosophy paints its grey on grey, then has the shape of the life grown old. By philosophy's grey on grey it cannot be rejuvenated, but only understood'. Famously, Hegel concludes: 'The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk.'⁸³ Ignoring the literary qualities of this assertion, Hegel is making a relatively mundane observation: something's happening cannot be simultaneous with our understanding of it. But the passage is pervaded figuratively by the funereal – the grey upon grey, like ashes to ashes; the blackness of night into which we all will eventually pass; the silent flight of the owl, a bird that is not only a symbol of wisdom, but in numerous cultures an omen, a harbinger of death, a ghost. Knowledge remains on the side of death. As Hegel says, it 'always comes too late'; it can never save life. If only we could somehow know before we come to know. But Hegel dismisses this: it is

just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age, or jump over [the Colossus of] Rhodes. If his theory really goes beyond the world as it is and builds an ideal one as it ought to be, that world exists indeed, but only in his opinions, an unsubstantial element where anything you please may, in fancy, be built.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, in the last period of his life, Said was indeed plagued, Cassandra-like, by prescient intuitions regarding various crises, particularly within the Middle East – intuitions which, as Tony Judt noted, placed Said at odds with others: for example, his predictions

⁸² See above, note 2.

⁸³ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. Thomas Malcolm Knox (Oxford, 1942), 12–13.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

regarding the Oslo process; or his sense that, since the fates of Jews and Arabs were now so entangled, the two-state solution was no longer viable. As Judt wrote in 2004: 'In retrospect it is difficult to deny that he got it right and we were wrong.'⁸⁵

For the Said that many of us recall – the hectoring humanist with bullish enlightenment faith in the powers of understanding allied to relentless modernist scepticism – such an interpretation would have been given short shrift: for him there were no such things as prophecies, only well-informed predictions, which happened only if you had done your homework, scoured the archives and reconstructed the historicizable locations in which human actions and thoughts emerge. Indeed, this Said died only when Said himself did. In his last major speech in the United States, we still get it raw:

History is made by men and women, and the world we live in is a secular and historical world as a result. History is the product of human labour, choice and will. Nothing transcendental or divine can supersede that truth or suspend the consequences that flow from its application.⁸⁶

But if Said retained fidelity to this ethos, the stringencies he perceived in the global political landscape as it hurtled from the pitiful denials of the 1990s into the new millennium's crises seemed also to justify a number of less obviously publicized affairs with somewhat Other ways of knowing, which sometimes led him close to betraying the features with which he usually identified.⁸⁷

If knowledge, to return to Hegel, can be on the side of death, then perhaps when human life is under threat something about knowledge can be made to shift allegiances. And so there are intimations in Said's later praxis that he is en route to formulating such prophetic disciplines, paradoxically via an encounter with a past that he confesses to have failed initially to have understood: that is, when Said met Jean Genet. This happened properly once, in autumn 1972, when Said was on sabbatical for a year in Beirut. They were introduced by Said's old friend Hanna Mikhail. But Said had seen the writer from a distance before, on the steps of Low Library at Columbia University in 1970, when Genet was giving an impromptu speech

⁸⁵ Tony Judt, 'Edward Said: The Rootless Cosmopolitan', *The Nation*, 19 July 2004. The quotation is taken from the reprint of the essay in Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (New York, 2008), 163–78 (p. 168). Judt's essay was originally written as an introduction to Said's posthumous collection of essays *From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map* (New York, 2007).

⁸⁶ Edward Said, 'Memory, Inequality, and Power: Palestine and the Universality of Human Rights', given in February 2003 at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at the University of California Berkeley. This quotation is my own transcription from the video footage, taken from <www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pb2pYStv8x8> (accessed 3 December 2014). A version of the talk also appears in *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 24 (2004), 15–33.

⁸⁷ I have argued elsewhere that in his later work Said allowed his normative modes of knowledge-making, and the ethics and politics attendant upon them, to become infected by what I have termed (with a distinctive nod towards Nietzsche) forgetting. See James R. Currie, *Music and the Politics of Negation* (Bloomington, IN, 2012), Chapter 5, 'Forgetting (Edward Said)', 139–77; and *idem*, 'Another Music, a Time to Forget: Reflections on Edward Said's Late Style', *Contemporary Music Review*, 31 (2012), 507–19, repr. in *Music in Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. Martin Scherzinger (London and New York, 2015), 163–76. This piece supplements my earlier work on Said's late style with the following proposition: that one of the possibilities made available by the forms of forgetting activated by art and, in particular, musical performance is the ability to predict the future.

at a rally for the Black Panthers, whose political cause Genet accompanied during these years. In the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, Benjamin famously asserts that revolutionary historical practice is driven by the wish ‘to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears [flashes up] to man singled out by history at a moment of danger’.⁸⁸ Indeed, the sighting of Genet at Columbia had sufficient effect on Said to develop the image that then flashed up in the opening of the essay he wrote on the author nearly 20 years later.⁸⁹ ‘What I have never forgotten was the gaze of Genet’s piercing blue eyes: they seemed to reach out across the distance and fix you with an enigmatic and curiously neutral look.’⁹⁰

But why this image, and why then? For Benjamin, an inadvertent recurrence accompanied by our attempt to seize hold of it as image results from the presence of danger. The writing of Said’s Genet essay took place during the First Palestinian Intifada. But what predominates in Said’s return to his cryptic encounter with Genet was a post-factum realization of Genet’s abilities, in his nomadic years when Said met him in Beirut, to have intuited something of dangers still to come, dangers of which Said was then unaware. The slow burn of the spell that is eventually to make Said’s essay appear originates in Genet’s powers of intuition and prophecy – the very powers of which Said is then to come into possession in the years following the essay’s first appearance. Considering Said’s secular intellectual ethos, it is unsurprising to note scepticism on the cusp of his plunge into such sorcery: ‘I don’t want to read too much into Genet’s presence in that part of the world at that time.’ But immediately, Said’s prose is illuminated by a stylistic grandeur bespeaking forces that exceed such caution:

But it has seemed retrospectively to be a portent of much that has been bewildering and agonistically stunning about events in Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon. The Lebanese Civil War would break out almost exactly three years later; Hanna Mikhail [who had introduced me to Genet] would be killed four years later; the Israeli invasion of Lebanon would occur ten years later; *Un captif amoureux* [Genet’s poetic testament to his years with the Palestinians] would appear fourteen years later; and very importantly from my point of view, the *intifada* that would lead to the declaration of a Palestinian state was to explode into actuality fifteen years later. In the violence and incomprehensible beauty of the deeply shattering and disruptive events that have reconfigured an already absurdist landscape into an entirely new topography, it was Genet’s quiet figure moving through the Levant that seemed to me, and doubtless to others, to have informed the dense fluidity of what would take place. I saw this largely because at the time I met him in 1972, even though I had not read or seen *Les paravents* [his play about the Algerian revolution] and of course *Un captif amoureux* had not appeared, I sensed that this titanic artist and personality had intuited the scope and drama of what we were living through, in Lebanon, Palestine, and elsewhere.⁹¹

The partially camouflaged lesson in temporality that Said draws from his séance with Genet concerns not the present tense now that understanding must capture, but the place to which that now is travelling. For Said, Genet seemed to have divined forces passing through

⁸⁸ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zhon (New York, 1968), 253–64 (p. 255).

⁸⁹ The essay (‘On Jean Genet’s Late Works’) first appeared in the New York literary magazine *Grand Street* in 1990, and was later included in the posthumously published *On Late Style: Music and Literature against the Grain* (New York, 2006), 73–89, three years after Said’s death.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

events themselves and to have hooked himself onto them, not only epistemologically, as understanding, but also geographically, where those forces physically drove Genet's nomadic wanderings, particularly with the Palestinians. Not unlike a mystic, Genet developed the ability to make the choice to give himself over to something else, and thus gave up his choice as normatively understood. He is both a human, in the sense that modernity has liked to imagine such a thing (an autonomous entity identifiable by means of personality, character, interests and so on), and a kind of conscious void that, to return to Said's image, has 'piercing blue eyes' that seem to 'reach out across the distance and fix you with an enigmatic and curiously neutral look'. Genet had become voluntarily involuntary, which is exactly Adorno's definition of artistic production in his own, oddly divinatory text, *Minima moralia*.⁹² And since Said on a number of occasions claimed that he read an aphorism from Adorno's text every night before sleep, such an intellectual tendency was, quite feasibly, an active feature in the landscape of Said's dream life in his later years.⁹³ So it is perhaps no surprise that the means by which Genet arrives at his powers is, for Said, through the very artifice of Genet's own aesthetic production. As Said acknowledges:

I could not have felt [in 1972] what I feel now, that the dislocating and yet rigorous energies and vision of [Genet's Algerian revolution play] *Les paravents* would not, could not, be stilled after Algerian independence in 1962 but would, like the nomadic figures spoken of by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Mille Plateaux*, wander elsewhere in search of acknowledgment and illumination.⁹⁴

Art, in essence, is the means by which, in a time of danger, we predict the future.

My hypothesis, which space precludes me from pursuing here, is that such incipient skills, caught through remembrance of Genet, provide one of the secret foundations for the discourse that accompanied the early stages of the project that Said asserted was the most important one of his life: the founding of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra. As I have continued to find, that discourse, like the later work of Said itself, is split between, on the one hand, normative agendas based on knowledge and, on the other, more peculiar revelations as to what musical life might teach us about how to live extra-musically, as it were.⁹⁵ My story here, then, is a potentially interesting musicological case of the strange roots by which music comes into being: in this case, in part, through a Palestinian intellectual being haunted by the image of the gaze of a homosexual French novelist standing on the steps of an Ivy League

⁹² 'Artistic productivity is the capacity for being voluntarily involuntary.' Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York, 1978), 222.

⁹³ Said would quickly break an association with a thinker if he thought (as in the case of his early employment of the work of Michel Foucault) it was starting to turn into a form of identification by which he would be recognized by others. However, as many commentators have noted, Said's relationship with Adorno in the last 15 years was flagrantly (even performatively) identificatory. Famously, in an interview published in *Ha-aretz* in 2000, for example, Said claimed that he was 'the only true follower of Adorno'. Edward W. Said, 'My Right of Return', repr. in *Power, Politics, and Culture: Interviews with Edward W. Said*, ed. Gauri Viswanathan (New York, 2002), 443–58 (p. 458). For a sensitive introduction to the question of Adorno's import to Said's later intellectual projects, see Moustafa Bayoumi, 'Reconciliation without Duress: Said, Adorno, and the Autonomous Intellectual', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 25 (2005), 46–64.

⁹⁴ Said, *On Late Style*, 77.

⁹⁵ See above, note 87.

university surrounded by African American political radicals. If, like other musicologists who have dealt with the West-Eastern Divan, I have found myself sometimes disappointed with what that orchestra has become, then maybe that is because its project, broadly conceived as an example, is not yet complete. And so since we are intellectuals facing the very real difficulties of engaging with music in this undoubted time of danger (in which the violent fragilities of the world increasingly make their presence felt to us directly through the economic restrictions characterizing the neo-liberal university), then perhaps in turn we can be haunted by Said, in the way in which Said was himself when he met Genet. Perhaps responsibility for the orchestra's promise passes now to us.