Edward W. Said

CULTURE

AND

IMPERIALISM

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So pervasive has the professionalization of intellectual life become that the sense of vocation, as Julien Benda described it for the intellectual, has been almost swallowed up. Policy-oriented intellectuals have internalized the norms of the state, which when it understandably calls them to the capital, in effect becomes their patron. The critical sense is often conveniently jettisoned. As for intellectuals whose charge includes values and principles—literary, philosophical, historical specialists—the American university, with its munificence, utopian sanctuary, and remarkable diversity, has defanged them. Jargons of an almost unimaginable rebarbative ness dominate their styles. Cults like post-modernism, discourse analysis, New Historicism, deconstruction, neo-pragmatism transport them into the country of the blue; an astonishing sense of weightlessness with regard to the gravity of history and individual responsibility fitters away attention to public matters, and to public discourse. The result is a kind of floundering about that is most dispiriting to witness, even as the society as a whole drifts without direction or coherence. Racism, poverty, ecological ravages, disease, and an appallingly widespread ignorance: these are left to the media and the odd political candidate during an election campaign.

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Challenging Orthodoxy and Authority

Not that we have wanted for extremely loud reminders of Chomsky's "reconstitution of ideology," whose elements include notions about Western Judeo-Christian triumphalism, the inherent backwardness of the non-Western world, the dangers of various foreign creeds, the proliferation of "anti-democratic" conspiracies, the celebration and recuperation of canonical works, authors, and ideas. Inversely, other cultures are more and more looked at through the perspectives of pathology and/or therapy. However accurate and serious as scholarship, reflection, and analysis, books appearing in London, Paris, or New York with titles like The African Condition or The Arab Predicament or The Republic of Fear or The Latin American Syndrome are consumed in what Kenneth Burke calls "frameworks of acceptance" whose conditions are quite peculiar.

On the one hand, no one in the dominant public space had paid much attention to Iraq as society, culture, or history until August 1991; then the outpouring of quick-fix books and television programs could hardly be
stopped. Typically *The Republic of Fear* appeared in 1989, unnoticed. Its author later became a celebrity not because his book makes a scholarly contribution—he does not pretend otherwise—but because its obsessive and monochromatic "portrait" of Iraq perfectly suits the need for dehumanized, ahistorical, and demonological representation of a country as the embodiment of an Arab Hitler. To be non-Western (the reifying labels are themselves symptomatic) is ontologically thus to be unfortunate in nearly every way, before the facts, to be at worst a maniac, and at best a follower, a lazy consumer who, as Naipaul says somewhere, can use but could never have invented the telephone.

On the other hand, the demystification of all cultural constructs, "ours" as well as "theirs," is a new fact that scholars, critics, and artists have put before us. We cannot speak of history today without, for instance, making room in our statements about it for Hayden White's theses in *Metahistory*, that all historical writing is writing and delivers figural language and representational tropes, be they in the codes of metonymy, metaphor, allegory, or irony. From the work of Lukacs, Fredric Jameson, Foucault, Derrida, Sartre, Adorno, and Benjamin—to mention only some of the obvious names—we have a vivid apprehension of the processes of regulation and force by which cultural hegemony reproduces itself, pressing even poetry and spirit into administration and the commodity form.

Yet, in the main, the breach between these consequential metropolitan theorists and either the ongoing or the historical imperial experience is truly vast. The contributions of empire to the arts of observation, description, disciplinary formation, and theoretical discourse have been ignored; and with fastidious discretion, perhaps squeamishness, these new theoretical discoveries have routinely bypassed the confluences between their findings and the liberationist energies released by resistance cultures in the Third World. Very rarely do we encounter direct applications from one realm to the other, as we do when, for a lonely example, Arnold Krupat turns the resources of post-structuralist theory on that sad panorama produced by genocide and cultural amnesia which is beginning to be known as "native American literature," in order to interpret the configurations of power and authentic experience contained in its texts.28

We can and indeed must speculate as to why there has been a practice of self-confinement of the libertarian theoretical capital produced in the West, and why at the same time, in the formerly colonial world, the prospect for a culture with strongly liberationist components has rarely seemed dimmer.

Let me give an example. Asked in 1985 by a national university in one of the Persian Gulf States to visit there for a week, I found that my mission was to evaluate its English program and perhaps offer some recommendations for its improvement. I was flabbergasted to discover that in sheer numerical terms English attracted the largest number of young people of any department in the university, but disheartened to find that the curriculum was divided about equally between what was called linguistics (that is, grammar and phonetic structure) and literature. The literary courses were, I thought, rigorously orthodox, a pattern followed even in older and more distinguished Arab universities like those of Cairo and Ain Shams. Young Arabs dutifully read Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Austen, and Dickens as they might have studied Sanskrit or medieval heraldry; no emphasis was placed on the relationship between English and the colonial processes that brought the language and its literature to the Arab world. I could not detect much interest, except in private discussions with a few faculty members, in the new English-language literatures of the Caribbean, Africa, or Asia. It was an anachronistic and odd confluence of rote learning, uncritical teaching, and (to put it kindly) haphazard results.

Still, I learned two facts that interested me as a secular intellectual and critic. The reason for the large numbers of students taking English was given frankly by a somewhat disaffected instructor: many of the students proposed to end up working for airlines, or banks, in which English was the worldwide *lingua franca*. This all but terminally consigned English to the level of a technical language stripped of expressive and aesthetic characteristics and denuded of any critical or self-conscious dimension. You learned English to use computers, respond to orders, transmit telexes, decipher manifests, and so forth. That was all. The other thing I discovered, to my alarm, was that English such as it was existed in what seemed to be a seething caldron of Islamic revivalism. Everywhere I turned, Islamic slogans relating to elections for the university senate were plastered all over the wall (I later found out that the various Islamic candidates won a handsome, if not crushing, plurality). In Egypt, in 1989, after having lectured to the English Faculty of Cairo University for an hour about nationalism, independence, and liberation as alternative cultural practices to imperialism, I was asked about "the theocratic alternative." I had mistakenly supposed the questioner was asking about "the Socratic alternative" and was put right very quickly. She was a well-spoken young woman whose head was covered by a veil; I had overlooked her concerns in my anti-clerical and secular zeal. (I nevertheless proceeded boldly to my attack!)

Thus using the very same English of people who aspire to literary accomplishments of a very high order, who allow a critical use of the language to permit a decolonizing of the mind, as Ngugi wa Thiongo puts it, coexists with very different new communities in a less appealing new configuration. In places where English was once the language of ruler and administrator,
it is a much diminished presence, either a technical language with wholly instrumental characteristics and features, or a foreign language with various implicit connections to the larger English-speaking world, but its presence competes with the impressively formidable emergent reality of organized religious fervor. Since the language of Islam is Arabic, a language with considerable literary community and hieratic force, English has sunk to a low, uninteresting, and attenuated level.

To gauge this new subordination in an era when in other contexts English has acquired remarkable prominence and many interesting new communities of literary, critical, and philosophical practice, we need only briefly recall the stunning acquiescence of the Islamic world to the prohibitions, proscriptions, and threats pronounced by Islam’s clerical and secular authorities against Salman Rushdie because of his novel *The Satanic Verses*. I do not mean that the entire Islamic world acquiesced, but that its official agencies and spokespeople either blindly rejected or vehemently refused to engage with a book which the enormous majority of people never read. (Khomeini’s fatwa of course went a good deal further than mere rejection, but the Iranian position was a relatively isolated one.) That it dealt with Islam in English for what was believed to be a largely Western audience was its main offense. But, equally important, two factors marked the English-speaking world’s reaction to the events surrounding *The Satanic Verses*. One was the virtual unanimity of cautious and timid condemnations of Islam, marshalled in a cause that appeared to most of the metropolitan writers and intellectuals both safe and politically correct. As for the many writers who had been murdered, imprisoned, or banned in nations that were either American allies (Morocco, Pakistan, Israel) or anti-American so-called “terrorist” states (Libya, Iran, Syria), very little was said. And second, once the ritual phrases in support of Rushdie and denunciatory of Islam were pronounced, there seemed to be not much further interest either in the Islamic world as a whole or in conditions of authorship there. Greater enthusiasm and energy might have been expended in dialogue with those considerable literary and intellectual figures from the Islamic world (Mahfouz, Darwish, Munif, among others) who occasionally defended (and attacked) Rushdie in more trying circumstances than those obtaining in Greenwich Village or Hampstead.

There are highly significant deformations within the new communities and states that now exist alongside and partially within the world-English group dominated by the United States, a group that includes the heterogeneous voices, various languages, and hybrid forms that give Anglophonic writing its distinctive and still problematic identity. The emergence in recent decades of a startlingly sharp construction called “Islam” is one such deformation; others include “Communism,” “Japan,” and the “West,” each of

them possessing styles of polemic, batteries of discourse, and an unsettling profusion of opportunities for dissemination. In mapping the vast domains commanded by these gigantic caricatural essentializations, we can more fully appreciate and interpret the modest gains made by smaller literate groups that are bound together not by insensate polemic but by affinities, sympathies, and compassion.

Few people during the exhilarating heyday of decolonization and early Third World nationalism were watching or paying close attention to how a carefully nurtured nativism in the anti-colonial ranks grew and grew to inordinately large proportions. All those nationalist appeals to pure or authentic Islam, or to Afrocentrism, *négritude*, or Arabism had a strong response, without sufficient consciousness that those ethnicities and spiritual essences would come back to exact a very high price from their successful adherents. Fanon was one of the few to remark on the dangers posed to a great socio-political movement like decolonization by an untutored national consciousness. Much the same could be said about the dangers of an untutored religious consciousness. Thus the appearance of various mullahs, colonels, and one-party regimes who pleaded national security risks and the need to protect the founding revolutionary state as their platform, foisted a new set of problems onto the already considerably onerous heritage of imperialism.

It is not possible to name many states or regimes that are exempt from active intellectual and historical participation in the new post-colonial international configuration. National security and a separatist identity are the watchwords. Along with authorized figures—the ruler, the national heroes and martyrs, the established religious authorities—the newly triumphant politicians seemed to require borders and passports first of all. What had once been the imaginative liberation of a people—Aimé Césaire’s “inventions of new souls”—and the audacious metaphoric charting of spiritual territory usurped by colonial masters were quickly translated into and accommodated by a world system of barriers, maps, frontiers, police forces, customs and exchange controls. The finest, most elegiac commentary on this dismal state of affairs was provided by Basil Davidson in the course of a memorial reflection on the legacy of Amilcar Cabral. Rehearsing the questions that were never asked about what would happen after liberation, Davidson concludes that a deepening crisis brought on neo-imperialism and put petit bourgeois rulers firmly in command. But, he continues, this brand of

reformist nationalism continues to dig its own grave. As the grave deepens fewer and fewer persons in command are able to get their own heads above the edge of it. To the tune of requiems sung in solemn
chorus by hosts of foreign experts or would be fundi of one profession
or another, often on very comfortable (and comforting) salaries, the
funeral proceeds. The frontiers are there, the frontiers are sacred. What
else, after all, could guarantee privilege and power to ruling elites?29

Chinua Achebe’s most recent novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, is a compelling
survey of this enervating and dispiriting landscape.

Davidson goes on to modify the gloom of his own description by pointing
to what he calls the people’s “own solution to this carapace accepted from
the colonial period.”

What the peoples think upon this subject is shown by their incessant
emigration across these lines on the map, as well as by their smuggling
to that even while a “bourgeois Africa” hardens its frontiers, multiplies its border controls, and thunders against the smuggling
of persons and goods, a “peoples’” Africa works in quite another way.30

The cultural correlate of that audacious but often costly combination of
smuggling and emigration is, of course, familiar to us; it is exemplified by
that new group of writers referred to as cosmopolitan recently in a perceptive
analysis by Tim Brennan.31 And crossing borders as well as the representa-
tive deprivations and exhilarations of migration has become a major
theme in the art of the post-colonial era.

Although one may say that these writers and themes constitute a new
cultural configuration and one may point admiringly to regional aesthetic
achievements all over the world, I believe we should study the configuration
from a somewhat less attractive but, in my opinion, more realistic and
political point of view. While we should rightly admire both the material
and the achievements of Rushdie’s work, say, as part of a significant formation
within Anglophone literature, we should at the same time note that it is
cumbered, that aesthetically valuable work may be part of a threatening,
coercive, or deeply anti-literary, anti-intellectual formation. Before *The
Satanic Verses* appeared in 1988, Rushdie was already a problematic figure for the
English thanks to his essays and earlier novels; to many Indians and
Pakistanis in England and in the subcontinent, however, he was not only a
celebrated author they were proud of but also a champion of immigrants’
rights and a severe critic of nostalgic imperialists. After the *fate* his status
changed drastically, and he became anathema to his former admirers. To
have provoked Islamic fundamentalism when once he had been a virtual
representative of Indian Islam—this testifies to the urgent conjunction of art
and politics, which can be explosive.

“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a
document of barbarism,” said Walter Benjamin. Those darker connections
are where today’s interesting political and cultural conjunctures are to be
found. They affect our individual and collective critical work no less than the
hermeneutic and utopian work we feel easier about when we read,
discuss, and reflect on valuable literary texts.

Let me be more concrete. It is not only tired, harassed, and dispossessed
refugees who cross borders and try to become acculturated in new environ-
ments; it is also the whole gigantic system of the mass media that is ubiqui-
tous, slipping by most barriers and settling in nearly everywhere. I have said
that Herbert Schiller and Armand Mattelart have made us aware of the
domination by a handful of multinationals of the production and distribution
of journalistic representations; Schiller’s most recent study, *Culture, Inc.*, describes how it is that all departments of culture, not just news broad-
casting, have been invaded by or enclosed within an ever-expanding but small
circle of privately held corporations.32

This has a number of consequences. For one, the international media
system has in actuality done what idealistic or ideologically inspired notions
of collectivity—imagined communities—aspire to do. When, for instance,
we speak about and research something we call Commonwealth literature
or world literature in English, our efforts are at a putative level, really;
discussions of magic realism in the Caribbean and African novel, say, may allude to or at best outline the contours of a “post-modern” or national field
that unites these works, but we know that the works and their authors and
readers are specific to, and articulated in, local circumstances, and these
circumstances are usefully kept separate when we analyze the contrasting
conditions of reception in London or New York on the one hand, the
peripheries on the other. Compared with the way the four major Western
news agencies operate, the mode by which international English-language
television journalists select, gather, and rebroadcast pictorial images from all
over the world, or the way Hollywood programs like *Bonanza* and *I Love Lucy*
work their way through even the Lebanese civil war, our critical efforts are
small and primitive, for the media are not only a fully integrated practical
network, but a very efficient mode of assimilation knitting the world together.

This world system, articulating and producing culture, economics, and
political power along with their military and demographic coefficients, has
an institutionalized tendency to produce out-of-scale trans-national images
that are now reorienting international social discourse and process. Take as a
case in point the emergence of “terrorism” and “fundamentalism” as two
key terms of the 1980s. For one, you could hardly begin (in the public space
provided by international discourse) to analyze political conflicts involving
Sunnis and Shi'is, Kurds and Iraqis, or Tamils and Sinhalese, or Sikhs and Hindus—the list is long—without eventually having to resort to the categories and images of “terrorism” and “fundamentalism,” which derived entirely from the concerns and intellectual factories in metropolitan centers like Washington and London. They are fearful images that lack discriminate contents or definition, but they signify moral power and approval for whoever uses them, moral defensiveness and criminalization for whomever they designate. These two gigantic reductions mobilized armies as well as dispersed communities. Not Iran’s official reaction to Rushdie’s novel, or the unofficial enthusiasm for him among Islamic communities in the West, or the public and private expression of outrage in the West against the fatwa is intelligible, in my opinion, without reference to the overall logic and the minute articulations and reactions set in motion by the overbearing system I have been trying to describe.

So it is that in the fairly open environment of communities of readers interested, for example, in emergent post-colonial Anglophone or Francophone literature, the underlying configurations are directed and controlled not by processes of hermeneutic investigation, or by sympathetic and literate intuition, or by informed reading, but by much coarser and more instrumental processes whose goal is to mobilize consent, to eradicate dissent, to promote an almost literally blind patriotism. By such means the governability of large numbers of people is assured, numbers whose potentially disruptive ambitions for democracy and expression are held down (or narcotized) in mass societies, including, of course, Western ones.

The fear and terror induced by the overscale images of “terrorism” and “fundamentalism”—call them the figures of an international or transnational imaginary made up of foreign devils—hastens the individual’s subordination to the dominant norms of the moment. This is as true in the new post-colonial societies as it is in the West generally and the United States particularly. Thus to oppose the abnormality and extremism embedded in terrorism and fundamentalism—my example has only a small degree of parody—is also to uphold the moderation, rationality, executive centrality of a vaguely designated “Western” (or otherwise local and patriotically assumed) ethos. The irony is that far from endorsing the Western ethos with the confidence and secure “normality” we associate with privilege and rectitude, this dynamic imbues “us” with a righteous anger and defensive ness in which “others” are finally seen as enemies, bent on destroying our civilization and way of life.

This is a mere sketch of how these patterns of coercive orthodoxy and self-aggrandizement further strengthen the power of unthinking assent and unchallengeable doctrine. As these are slowly perfected over time and much repetition, they are answered, alas, with corresponding finality by the designated enemies. Thus Muslims or Africans or Indians or Japanese, in their idioms and from within their own threatened localities, attack the West, or Americanization, or imperialism, with little more attention to detail, critical differentiation, discrimination, and distinction than has been levied on them by the West. The same is true for Americans, to whom patriotism is next to godliness. This is an ultimately senseless dynamic. Whatever the “border wars” have as aims, they are impoverishing. One must join the primordial or constituted group; or, as a subaltern Other, one must accept inferior status; or one must fight to the death.

These border wars are an expression of essentializations—Africanizing the African, Orientalizing the Oriental, Westernizing the Western, Americanizing the American, for an indefinite time and with no alternative (since African, Oriental, Western essences can only remain essences)—a pattern that has been held over from the era of classic imperialism and its systems. What resists it? One obvious instance is identified by Immanuel Wallerstein as what he calls anti-systemic movements, which emerged as a consequence of historical capitalism. There have been enough cases of these latecom ing movements in recent times to hearten even the most intransigent pessimist: the democracy movements on all sides of the socialist divide, the Palestinian intifada, various social, ecological, and cultural movements throughout North and South America, the women’s movement. Yet it is difficult for these movements to be interested in the world beyond their own borders, or to have the capacity and freedom to generalize about it. If you are part of a Philippine, or Palestinian, or Brazilian oppositional movement, you must deal with the tactical and logistical requirements of the daily struggle. Yet I do think that efforts of this kind are developing, if not a general theory, then a common discursive readiness or, to put it territorially, an underlying world map. Perhaps we may start to speak of this somewhat elusive oppositional mood, and its emerging strategies, as an internationalist counter-articulation.

What new or newer kind of intellectual and cultural politics does this internationalism call for? What important transformations and transfigurations should there be in our traditionally and Eurocentrically defined ideas of the writer, the intellectual, the critic? English and French are world languages, and the logics of borders and warring essences are totalizing, so we should begin by acknowledging that the map of the world has no divinely or dogmatically sanctioned spaces, essences, or privileges. However, we may speak of secular space, and of humanly constructed and interdependent histories that are fundamentally knowable, although not through grand theory or systematic totalization. Throughout this book, I have been saying...
that human experience is finely textured, dense, and accessible enough not to need extra-historical or extra-worldly agencies to illuminate or explain it. I am talking about a way of regarding our world as amenable to investigation and interrogation without magic keys, special jargons and instruments, curtained-off practices.

We need a different and innovative paradigm for humanistic research. Scholars can be frankly engaged in the politics and interests of the present—with open eyes, rigorous analytical energy, and the decently social values of those who are concerned with the survival neither of a disciplinary fiefdom or guild nor of a manipulative identity like "India" or "America," but with the improvement and non-coercive enhancement of life in a community struggling to exist among other communities. One must not minimize the inventive excavations required in this work. One is not looking for uniquely original essences, either to restore them or to set them in a place of unimpeachable honor. The study of Indian history is viewed by Subaltern Studies, for example, as an ongoing contest between classes and their disputed epistemologies; similarly, "Englishness" for the contributors to the three-volume Patriotism edited by Raphael Samuel is not given priority before history, any more than "Attic civilization" in Bernal's Black Athena is made simply to serve as an ahistorical model of a superior civilization.

The idea behind these works is that orthodoxy, authoritatively national and institutional versions of history tend principally to freeze provisional and highly contestable versions of history into official identities. Thus the official version of British history embedded, say, in the durbar arranged for Queen Victoria's Indian Viceroy in 1876 pretends that British rule had an almost mythical longevity over India; traditions of Indian service, obeisance, and subordination are implicated in these ceremonies so as to create the image of an entire continent's trans-historical identity pressed into compliance before the image of a Britain whose own constructed identity is that it has ruled and must always rule both the waves and India. 

Whereas these official versions of history try to do this for identitarian authority (to use Adornian terms)—the caliphate, the state, the orthodox clerisy, the Establishment—the disenchantments, the disputatious and systematically skeptical investigations in the innovative works I have cited submit these composite, hybrid identities to a negative dialectic which dissolves them into variously constructed components. What matters a great deal more than the stable identity kept current in official discourse is the contestatory force of an interpretative method whose material is the disparate, but intertwined and interdependent, and above all overlapping streams of historical experience.

A superbly audacious instance of this force can be found in interpretations of the Arabic literary and cultural tradition ventured by today's leading Arab poet, Adonis, the pen name of Ali Ahmed Said. Since the three volumes of Al-Thabit wa al-Mutabawwil were published between 1974 and 1978, he has almost single-handedly been challenging the persistence of what he regards as the ossified, tradition-bound Arab-Islamic heritage, stuck not only in the past but in rigid and authoritarian rereadings of that past. The purpose of these rereadings, he has said, is to keep the Arabs from truly encountering modernity (al-badatba). His book on Arab poetics Adonis associates literal, hard-bound readings of great Arab poetry with the ruler, whereas an imaginative reading reveals that at the heart of the classical tradition—even including the Koran—a subversive and dissenting strain counters the apparent orthodoxy proclaimed by the temporal authorities. He shows how the rule of law in Arab society separates power from critique and tradition from innovation, thereby confining history to an exhausting code of endlessly reiterated precedents. To this system he opposes the dissolving powers of critical modernity:

Those in power designated everyone who did not think according to the culture of the caliphate as "the people of innovation" (abi al-ibadab), excluding them with this indictment of heresy from their Islamic affiliation. This explains how the terms ibadab (modernity) and mubadab (modern, new), used to characterize the poetry which violated the ancient poetic principles, came originally from the religious lexicon. Consequently we can see that the modern in poetry appeared to the ruling establishment as a political or intellectual attack on the culture of the regime and a rejection of the idealized standards of the ancient, and how, therefore, in Arab life the poetic has always been mixed up with the political and religious, and indeed continues to be so.

Although the work of Adonis and his associates in the journal Marwaqif is scarcely known outside the Arab world, it can be seen as part of a much larger international configuration that includes the Field Day writers in Ireland, the Subaltern Studies group in India, most of the dissenting writers in Eastern Europe, and many Caribbean intellectuals and artists whose heritage is traced to C.L.R. James (Wilson Harris, George Lamming, Eric Williams, Derek Walcott, Edward Braithwaite, the early V. S. Naipaul). For all these movements and individuals, the clichés and patriotic idealizations of official history can be dissolved, along with their legacy of intellectual bondage and defensive recriminations. As Seamus Deane put it for the Irish case, "The myth of Irishness, the notion of Irish unreality, the notions surrounding Irish eloquence, are all political themes upon which the litera-
ture has batten to an extreme degree since the nineteenth century when the idea of national character was invented.” The job facing the cultural intellectual is therefore not to accept the politics of identity as given, but to show how all representations are constructed, for what purpose, by whom, and with what components.

This is far from easy. An alarming defensiveness has crept into America’s official image of itself, especially in its representations of the national past. Every society and official tradition defends itself against interferences with its sanctioned narratives; over time these acquire an almost theological status, with founding heroes, cherished ideas and values, national allegories having an inestimable effect in cultural and political life. Two of these elements—America as a pioneering society and American political life as a direct reflection of democratic practices—have come under recent scrutiny, with a resulting furor that has been quite remarkable. In both cases there has been some but by no means enough serious and secular intellectual effort by intellectuals themselves to accept critical views; rather like the media anchors persons who internalize the norms of power, they have internalized norms of official self-identity.

Consider “America as West,” an exhibition mounted at the National Gallery of American Art in 1991; the gallery is part of the Smithsonian Institution, maintained in part by the federal government. According to the exhibit, the conquest of the West and its subsequent incorporation into the United States had been transformed into a heroic melodist narrative that disguised, romanticized, or simply eliminated the many-sided truth about the actual process of conquest, as well as the destruction of both native Americans and the environment. Images of the Indian in nineteenth-century American paintings, for example—noble, proud, reflective—were set against a running text on the same wall that described the native American’s degradations at the hands of the white man. Such “deconstructions” as this stirred the ire of members of Congress, whether they had seen the exhibition or not; they found its unpatriotic or un-American slant unacceptable, especially for a federal institution, to exhibit. Professors, pundits, and journalists attacked what they considered a malignant slur on the United States’ uniqueness,” which, in the words of a Washington Post writer, is the “hope and optimism of its founding, the promise of its bounty, and the persevering efforts of its government.” There were only a few exceptions to this view, for example Robert Hughes, who wrote in Time (May 31, 1991) about the art exhibited as “a foundation myth in paint and stone.”

That a strange mixture of invention, history, and self-aggrandizement had gone into this national origin story as it does into all of them was ruled by a semi-official consensus to be not fit for America. Paradoxically, the United States, as an immigrant society composed of many cultures, has a public discourse more policed, more anxious to depict the country as free from taint, more unified around one iron-clad major narrative of innocent triumph. This effort to keep things simple and good disaffiliates the country from its relationship with other societies and peoples, thereby reinforcing its remoteness and insularity.

Another extraordinary case was the controversy surrounding Oliver Stone’s seriously flawed film JFK, released in late 1991, the premise of which was that Kennedy’s assassination had been planned in a conspiracy of Americans who opposed his desire to end the war in Vietnam. Granted that the film was uneven and confused, and granted that Stone’s main reason for making it may have been only commercial, why did so many unofficial agencies of cultural authority—newspapers of record, establishment historians, politicians—think it important to attack the film? It takes very little for a non-American to accept as a starting point that most, if not all, political assassinations are conspiracies, because that is the way the world is. But a chorus of American sages takes acres of print to deny that conspiracies occur in America, since “we” represent a new, and better, and more innocent world. At the same time there is plentiful evidence of official American conspiracies and assassination attempts against the sanctioned “foreign devils” (Castro, Qaddafi, Saddam Hussein, and so on). The connections are not made, and the reminders remain unpronounced.

A set of major corollaries derives from this. If the chief, most official, forceful, and coercive identity is of a state with its borders, customs, ruling parties and authorities, official narratives and images, and if intellectuals consider that identity is in need of constant criticism and analysis, then it must follow that other similarly constructed identities need similar investigation and interrogation. The education of those of us who are interested in literature and the study of culture has for the most part been organized under various rubrics—the creative writer, the self-sufficient and autonomous work, the national literature, the separate genres—that have acquired almost fetishistic presence. Now it would be insane to argue that individual writers and works do not exist, that French, Japanese, and Arabic are not separate things, or that Milton, Tagore, and Alejo Carpentier are only trivially different variations on the same theme. Neither am I saying that an essay about Great Expectations and Dickens’s actual novel Great Expectations are the same thing. But I am saying that “identity” does not necessarily imply ontologically given and eternally determined stability, or uniqueness, or irreducible character, or privileged status as something total and complete in and of itself. I would prefer to interpret a novel as the choice of one mode of writing from among many others, and the activity of writing as one social
mode among several, and the category of literature as something created to
serve various worldly aims, including and perhaps even mainly aesthetic
ones. Thus the focus in the destabilizing and investigative attitudes of those
whose work actively opposes states and borders is on how a work of art, for
instance, begins as a work, begins from a political, social, cultural situation,
begins to do certain things and not others.

The modern history of literary study has been bound up with the de-
velopment of cultural nationalism, whose aim was first to distinguish the na-
tional canon, then to maintain its eminence, authority, and aesthetic
autonomy. Even in discussions concerning culture in general that seemed to
rise above national differences in deference to a universal sphere, hierarchies
and ethnic preferences (as between European and non-European) were held
to. This is as true of Matthew Arnold as it is of twentieth-century cultural
and philological critics whom I revere—Auerbach, Adorno, Spitzer, Black-
mur. For them all, their culture was in a sense the only culture. The threats
against it were largely internal—for the modern ones they were fascism and
communism—and what they upheld was European bourgeois humanism.

Neither the ethos nor the rigorous training required to install that bildung
nor the extraordinary discipline it demanded has survived, although occasion-
ally one hears the accents of admiration and retrospective discipleship;
but no critical work done now resembles work on the order of Mimesis.
Instead of European bourgeois humanism, the basic premise now is provided
by a residue of nationalism, with its various derivative authorities, in alliance
with a professionalism that divides material into fields, subdivisions, special-
ties, accreditations, and the like. The surviving doctrine of aesthetic auton-
yomy has dwindled into a formalism associated with one or another
professional method—structuralism, deconstruction, etc.

A look at some of the new academic fields that have been created since
World War Two, and especially as a result of non-European nationalist
struggles, reveals a different topography and a different set of imperatives.
On the one hand, most students and teachers of non-European literatures
today must from the outset take account of the politics of what they study;
one cannot postpone discussions of slavery, colonialism, racism in any seri-
ous investigations of modern Indian, African, Latin and North American,
Arabic, Caribbean, and Commonwealth literature. Nor is it intellectually
responsible to discuss them without referring to their embattled circum-
stances either in post-colonial societies or as marginalized and/or subju-
gated subjects confined to secondary spots in the curricula in metropolitan
centers. Nor can one hide in positivism or empiricism and offhandedly
"require" the weapons of theory. On the other hand, it is a mistake to argue
that the "other" non-European literatures, those with more obviously
worldly affiliations to power and politics, can be studied "respectably," as if
they were in actuality as high, autonomous, aesthetically independent, and
satisfying as Western literatures have been made to be. The notion of black
skin in a white mask is no more serviceable and dignified in literary study
than it is in politics. Emulation and mimicry do not get one very far.

Contamination is the wrong word to use here, but some notion of litera-
ture and indeed all culture as hybrid (in Homi Bhabha's complex sense of
that word)\textsuperscript{9} and encumbered, or entangled and overlapping with what used
to be regarded as extraneous elements—this strikes me as the essential idea
for the revolutionary realities today, in which the contests of the secular
world so provocatively inform the texts we both read and write. We can no
longer afford conceptions of history that stress linear development or
Hegelian transcendence, any more than we can accept geographical or
territorial assumptions that assign centrality to the Atlantic world and con-
genital and even delinquent peripherality to non-Western regions. If
configurations like "Anglophone literature" or "world literature" are to have
any meaning at all, it is therefore because by their existence and actuality
today they testify to the contests and continuing struggles by virtue of which
they emerged both as texts and as historical experiences, and because they
challenge so vigorously the nationalist basis for the composition and study
of literature, and the lofty independence and indifference with which it had
been customary to regard the metropolitan Western literatures.

Once we accept the actual configuration of literary experiences overlap-
ing with one another and interdependent, despite national boundaries and
coercively legislated national autonomies, history and geography are trans-
figured in new maps, in new and far less stable entities, in new types of
connections. Exile, far from being the fate of nearly forgotten unfortunates
who are dispossessed and expatriated, becomes something closer to a norm,
an experience of crossing boundaries and charting new territories in defiance
of the classic canonic enclosures, however much its loss and sadness should
be acknowledged and registered. Newly changed models and types jostle
against the older ones. The reader and writer of literature—which itself
loses its perdurable forms and accepts the testimonials, revisions, notations
of the post-colonial experience, including underground life, slave narratives,
women's literature, and prison—no longer need to be tied to an image of the
poet or scholar in isolation, secure, stable, national in identity, class, gender,
or profession, but can think and experience with Genet in Palestine or
Algeria, with Tayeb Salih as a Black man in London, with Jamaica Kincaid
in the white world, with Rushdie in India and Britain, and so on.

We must expand the horizons against which the questions of how and what
to read and write are both posed and answered. To paraphrase a remark
made by Erich Auerbach in one of his last essays, our philological home is the world, and not the nation or even the individual writer. This means that we professional students of literature must take account of a number of astringent issues here, at the risk of both unpopularity and accusations of megalomania. For in an age of the mass media and what I have called the manufacture of consent, it is Panglossian to imagine that the careful reading of a few works of art considered humanistically, professionally, or aesthetically significant is anything but a private activity with only slender public consequences. Texts are protean things; they are tied to circumstances and to politics large and small, and these require attention and criticism. No one can take stock of everything, of course, just as no one theory can explain or account for the connections among texts and societies. But reading and writing texts are never neutral activities: there are interests, powers, passions, pleasures entailed no matter how aesthetic or entertaining the work. Media, political economy, mass institutions—in fine, the tracings of secular power and the influence of the state—are part of what we call literature. And just as it is true that we cannot read literature by men without also reading literature by women—so transfigured has been the shape of literature—it is also true that we cannot deal with the literature of the peripheries without also attending to the literature of the metropolitan centers.

Instead of the partial analysis offered by the various national or systematically theoretical schools, I have been proposing the contrapuntal lines of a global analysis, in which texts and worldly institutions are seen working together, in which Dickens and Thackeray as London authors are read also as writers whose historical experience is informed by the colonial enterprises in India and Australia of which they were so aware, and in which the literature of one commonwealth is involved in the literatures of others. Separatist or nativist enterprises strike me as exhausted; the ecology of literature’s new and expanded meaning cannot be attached to only one essence or to the discrete idea of one thing. But this global, contrapuntal analysis should be modelled not (as earlier notions of comparative literature were) on a symphony but rather on an atonal ensemble; we must take into account all sorts of spatial or geographical and rhetorical practices—inflections, limits, constraints, intrusions, inclusions, prohibitions—all of them tending to elucidate a complex and uneven topography. A gifted critic’s intuitive synthesis, of the type volunteered by hermeneutic or philological interpretation (whose prototype is Dilthey), is still of value, but strikes me as the poignant reminder of a serener time than ours.

This brings us once again to the question of politics. No country is exempt from the debate about what is to be read, taught, or written. I have often envied American theorists for whom radical skepticism or deferential rever-}

ence of the status quo are real alternatives. I do not feel them as such, perhaps because my own history and situation do not allow such luxury, detachment, or satisfaction. Yet I do believe that some literature is actually good, and that some is bad, and I remain as conservative as anyone when it comes to, if not the redemptive value of reading a classic rather than staring at a television screen, then the potential enhancement of one’s sensibility and consciousness by doing so, by the exercise of one’s mind. I suppose the issue reduces itself to what our humdrum and pedestrian daily work, what we do as readers and writers, is all about, when on the one hand professionalism and patriotism will not serve and on the other waiting for apocalyptic change will not either. I keep coming back—simplistically and ideally—to the notion of opposing and alleviating coercive domination, transforming the present by trying rationally and analytically to lift some of its burdens, situating the works of various literatures with reference to one another and to their historical modes of being. What I am saying is that in the configurations and by virtue of the transfigurations taking place around us, readers and writers are now in fact secular intellectuals with the archival, expressive, elaborative, and moral responsibilities of that role.

For American intellectuals considerably more is at stake. We are formed by our country, and it has an enormous global presence. There is a serious issue posed by the opposition of, say, Paul Kennedy’s work—arguing that all great empires decline because they overextend themselves—and Joseph Nye’s, in whose new preface to Bound to Lead the American imperial claim to be number one, especially after the Gulf War, is reasserted. The evidence is in Kennedy’s favor, but Nye is too intelligent not to understand that “the problem for United States power in the twenty-first century will not be new challenges for hegemony but the new challenges of transnational interdependence.” Yet he concludes that “the United States remains the largest and richest power with the greatest capacity to shape the future. And in a democracy, the choices are the people’s.” The question is, though, do “the people” have direct access to power? Or are the presentations of that power so organized and culturally processed as to require a different analysis?

To speak of relentless commodification and specialization in this world, is, I think, to begin to formulate the analysis, especially since the American cult of expertise and professionalism, which has hegemony in cultural discourse, and the hypertrophy of vision and will are so advanced. Rarely before in human history has there been so massive an intervention of force and ideas from one culture to another as there is today from America to the rest of the world (Nye is right about this), and I shall return to the issue a little later. Yet it is also true that in the main we have rarely been so fragmented, so sharply reduced, and so completely diminished in our sense
of what our true (as opposed to asserted) cultural identity is. The fantastic explosion of specialized and separatist knowledge is partly to blame: Afrocentrism, Eurocentrism, Occidentalism, feminism, Marxism, deconstructionism, etc. The schools disable and disempower what was empowering and interesting about the original insights. And this in turn has cleared the space for a sanctioned rhetoric of national cultural purpose, well-embodied in such documents as the Rockefeller Foundation–commissioned study The Humanities in American Life, or, more recently and more politically, the various expositions of the former secretary of education (and former head of the National Endowment for the Humanities) William Bennett, speaking (in his “To Reclaim a Heritage”) not simply as a cabinet officer in the Reagan administration, but as self-designated spokesman for the West, a sort of Head of the Free World. He was joined by Allan Bloom and his followers, intellectuals who consider the appearance in the academic world of women, African-Americans, gays, and Native Americans, all of them speaking with genuine multiculturalism and new knowledge, as a barbaric threat to “Western Civilization.”

What do these “state of the culture” screeds tell us? Simply that the humanities are important, central, traditional, inspiring. Bloom wants us to read only a handful of Greek and Enlightenment philosophers in keeping with his theory about higher education in the United States being for “the elite.” Bennett goes as far as saying that we can “have” the humanities by “reclaiming” our traditions—the collective pronouns and the proprietary accents are important—through twenty or so major texts. If every American student were required to read Homer, Shakespeare, the Bible, and Jefferson, then we would achieve a full sense of national purpose. Underlying these epigonal replications of Matthew Arnold’s exhortations to the significance of culture is the social authority of patriotism, the fortifications of identity brought to us by “our” culture, whereby we can confront the world defiantly and self-confidently; in Francis Fukuyama’s triumphalist proclamation, “we” Americans can see ourselves as realizing the end of history.

This is an extremely drastic delimitation of what we have learned about culture—its productivity, its diversity of components, its critical and often contradictory energies, its radically antithetical characteristics, and above all its rich worldliness and complicity with imperial conquest and liberation. We are told that cultural or humanistic study is the recovery of the Judeo-Christian or Western heritage, free from native American culture (which the Judeo-Christian tradition in its early American embodiments set about to massacre) and from that tradition’s adventures in the non-Western world.

Yet the multicultural disciplines have in fact found a hospitable haven in the contemporary American academy, and this is a historical fact of extraor-

inary magnitude. To a great degree, William Bennett has had this as his target, as do Dinesh D’Souza, Roger Kimball, and Alvin Kernan; whereas we would have thought that it has always been a legitimate conception of the modern university’s secular mission (as described by Alvin Gouldner) to be a place where multiplicity and contradiction co-exist with established dogma and canonical doctrine. This is now refuted by a new conservative dogmatism claiming “political correctness” as its enemy. The neo-conservative supposition is that in admitting Marxism, structuralism, feminism, and Third World studies into the curriculum (and before that an entire generation of refugee scholars), the American university sabotaged the basis of its supposed authority and is now ruled by a Blanquist cabal of intolerant ideologues who “control” it.

The irony is that it has been the university’s practice to admit the subversions of cultural theory in order to some degree to neutralize them by fixing them in the status of academic subspecialties. So now we have the curious spectacle of teachers teaching theories that have been completely displaced—wrenched is the better word—from their contexts; I have elsewhere called this phenomenon “travelling theory.” In various academic departments—among them literature, philosophy, and history—theory is taught so as to make the student believe that he or she can become a Marxist, a feminist, an Afrocentrist, or a deconstructionist with about the same effort and commitment required in choosing items from a menu. Over and above that trivialization is a steadily more powerful cult of professional expertise, whose main ideological burden stipulates that social, political, and class-based commitments should be subsumed under the professional disciplines, so that if you are a professional scholar of literature or critic of culture, all your affiliations with the real world are subordinate to your professing in those fields. Similarly, you are responsible not so much to an audience in your community or society, as to and for your corporate guild of fellow experts, your department of specialization, your discipline. In the same spirit and by the same law of the division of labor, those whose job is “foreign affairs” or “Slavic or Middle Eastern area studies” attend to those matters and keep out of yours. Thus your ability to sell, market, promote, and package your expertise—from university to university, from publisher to publisher, from market to market—is protected, its value maintained, your competence enhanced. Robert McCaughey has written an interesting study of how this process works in international affairs; the title tells the whole story: International Studies and Academic Enterprise: A Chapter in the Enclosure of American Learning.

I am not discussing here all cultural practices in contemporary American society—very far from it. But I am describing a particularly influential
formation that has a decisive bearing on the relationship, inherited historically by the United States from Europe in the twentieth century, between culture and imperialism. Expertise in foreign policy has never been more profitable than it is today—hence never as sequestered from public tampering. So on the one hand we have the co-optations of foreign-area expertise by the academy (only experts on India can talk about India, only Africanists about Africa), and on the other reaffirmations of these co-optations by both the media and the government. These rather slow and silent processes are put in startling evidence, revealed impressively and suddenly, during periods of foreign crisis for the United States and its interests—for example, the Iranian hostage crisis, the shooting down of Korean Airlines flight 007, the Achille Lauro affair, the Libyan, Panamanian, and Iraqi wars. Then, as if by an open sesame as unarguably obeyed as it is planned to the last detail, public awareness is saturated with media analysis and stupefying coverage. Thus experience is emasculated. Adorno says:

The total obliteration of the war by information, propaganda, commentaries, with cameramen in the first tanks and war reporters dying heroic deaths, the mishmash of an enlightened manipulation of public opinion and oblivious activity: all this is another expression for the withering of experience, the vacuum between men and their fate, in which their real fate lies. It is as if the refined, hardened plaster-cast of events takes the place of events themselves. Men are reduced to walk-on parts in a monster documentary-film.46

It would be irresponsible to dismiss the effects that American electronic media coverage of the non-Western world—and the consequent displacements in print culture—has on American attitudes to, and foreign policy toward, that world. I argued the case in 1984 (and it is more true today) that limited public effect on the media’s performance coupled with an almost perfect correspondence between prevailing government policy and the ideology ruling news presentation and selection (an agenda set by certified experts hand in hand with media managers) keeps the United States’ imperial perspective toward the non-Western world consistent. As a result United States policy has been supported by a dominant culture that does not oppose its main tenets: support for dictatorial and unpopular regimes, for a scale of violence out of all proportion to the violence of native insurgency against American allies, for a steady hostility to the legitimacy of native nationalism.

The concurrence between such notions and the world-view promulgated by the media is quite exact. The history of other cultures is non-existent until it erupts in confrontation with the United States; most of what counts about foreign societies is compressed into thirty-second items, “sound-bites,” and into the question of whether they are pro- or anti-America, freedom, capitalism, democracy. Most Americans today know and discuss sports with greater skill than they do their own government’s behavior in Africa, Indochina, or Latin America; a recent poll showed that 89 percent of high school juniors believed that Toronto was in Italy. As framed by the media, the choice facing professional interpreters of, or experts on, “other” peoples is to tell the public whether what is happening is “good” for America or not—as if what is “good” could be articulated in fifteen-second sound bites—and then to recommend a policy for action. Every commentator or expert a potential secretary of state for a few minutes.

The internalization of norms used in cultural discourse, the rules to follow when statements are made, the “history” that is made official as opposed to the history that is not: all these of course are ways to regulate public discussion in all societies. The difference here is that the epic scale of United States global power and the corresponding power of the national domestic consensus created by the electronic media have no precedents. Never has there been a consensus so difficult to oppose nor so easy and logical to capitulate to unconsciously. Conrad saw Kurtz as a European in the African jungle and Gould as an enlightened Westerner in the South American mountains, capable of both civilizing and obliterating the natives; the same power, on a world scale, is true of the United States today, despite its declining economic power.

My analysis would be incomplete were I not to mention another important element. In speaking of control and consensus, I have used the word “hegemony” purposely, despite Nye’s disclaimer that the United States does not now aim for it. It is not a question of a directly imposed regime of conformity in the correspondence between contemporary United States cultural discourse and United States policy in the subordinate, non-Western world. Rather, it is a system of pressures and constraints by which the whole cultural corpus retains its essentially imperial identity and its direction. This is why it is accurate to say that a mainstream culture has a certain regularity, integrity, or predictability over time. Another way of putting this is to say that one can recognize new patterns of dominance, to borrow from Fredric Jameson’s description of post-modernism,48 in contemporary culture. Jameson’s argument is yoked to his description of consumer culture, whose central features are a new relationship with the past based on pastiche and nostalgia, a new and eclectic randomness in the cultural artefact, a reorganization of space, and characteristics of multinational capital. To this we must add the culture’s phenomenally incorporative capacity, which makes it
possible for anyone in fact to say anything at all, but everything is processed either toward the dominant mainstream or out to the margins.

Marginalization in American culture means a kind of unimportant provinciality. It means the inconsequence associated with what is not major, not central, not powerful—in short, it means association with what are considered euphemistically as "alternative" modes, alternative states, peoples, cultures, alternative theaters, presses, newspapers, artists, scholars, and styles, which may later become central or at least fashionable. The new images of centrality—directly connected with what C. Wright Mills called the power elite—supplant the slower, reflective, less immediate and rapid processes of print culture, with its encoding of the attendant and recalcitrant categories of historical class, inherited property, and traditional privilege. The executive presence is central in American culture today: the president, the television commentator, the corporate official, celebrity. Centrality is identity, what is powerful, important, and ours. Centrality maintains balance between extremes; it endows ideas with the balances of moderation, rationality, pragmatism; it holds the middle together.

And centrality gives rise to semi-official narratives that authorize and provoke certain sequences of cause and effect, while at the same time preventing counter-narratives from emerging. The commonest sequence is the old one that America, a force for good in the world, regularly comes up against obstacles posed by foreign conspiracies, ontologically mischievous and "against" America. Thus American aid to Vietnam and Iran was corrupted by communists on the one hand and terrorist fundamentalists on the other, leading to humiliation and bitter disappointment. Conversely, during the Cold War, the valiant Afghanistani mujabidin (freedom fighters), Poland's Solidarity movement, Nicaraguan "contras," Angolan rebels, Salvadoran regulars—all of whom "we" support—left to our proper devices would be victorious with "our" help, but the meddling efforts of liberals at home and disinformation experts abroad reduced our ability to help. Until the Gulf War, when "we" finally rid ourselves of the "Vietnam syndrome." These subliminally available capsule histories are refracted superbly in the novels of E. L. Doctorow, Don DeLillo, and Robert Stone, and mercilessly analyzed by journalists like Alexander Cockburn, Christopher Hitchens, Seymour Hersh, and in the tireless work of Noam Chomsky. But these official narratives still have the power to interdict, marginalize, and criminalize alternative versions of the same history—in Vietnam, Iran, the Middle East, Africa, Central America, Eastern Europe. A simple empirical demonstration of what I mean is what happens when you are given the opportunity to express a more complex, less sequential history: in fact you are compelled to retell the "facts" in such a way as to be inventing a language from scratch, as was the case with the Gulf War examples I discussed earlier. The most difficult thing to say during the Gulf War was that foreign societies in history and at present may not have assented to the imposition of Western political and military power, not because there was anything inherently evil about that power but because they felt it to be alien. To venture so apparently uncontroversial a truth about how all cultures in fact behave was nothing less than an act of delinquency; the opportunity offered you to say something in the name of pluralism and fairness was sharply restricted to inconsequential bursts of facts, stamped as either extreme or irrelevant. With no acceptable narrative to rely on, with no sustained permission to narrate, you feel crowded out and silenced.

To complete this rather bleak picture, let me add a few final observations about the Third World. Obviously we cannot discuss the non-Western world as disjunct from developments in the West. The ravages of colonial wars, the protracted conflicts between insurgent nationalism and anomalous imperialist control, the disputatious new fundamentalist and nativist movements nourished by despair and anger, the extension of the world system over the developing world—these circumstances are directly connected to actualities in the West. On the one hand, as Eqbal Ahmad says in the best account of these circumstances we have, the peasant and pre-capitalist classes that predominated during the era of classical colonialism have dispersed in the new states into new, often abruptly urbanized and restless classes tied to the absorptive economic and political power of the metropolitan West. In Pakistan and Egypt, for example, the contentious fundamentalists are led not by peasant or working-class intellectuals but by Western-educated engineers, doctors, lawyers. Ruling minorities emerge with the new deformations in the new structures of power. These pathologies, and the disenchanted with authority they have caused, run the gamut from the neo-fascist to the dynastic-oligarchic, with only a few states retaining a functioning parliamentary and democratic system. On the other hand, the crisis of the Third World does present challenges that suggest considerable scope for what Ahmad calls "a logic of daring." In having to give up traditional beliefs, the newly independent states recognize the relativism of, and possibilities inherent in, all societies, systems of belief, cultural practices. The experience of achieving independence imparts "optimism—the emergence and diffusion of a feeling of hope and power, of the belief that what exists does not have to exist, that people can improve their lot if they try [and] ... rationalism ... the spread of the presumption that planning, organization and the use of scientific knowledge will resolve social problems."
Movements and Migrations

For all its apparent power, this new overall pattern of domination, developed during an era of mass societies commanded at the top by a powerfully centralizing culture and a complex incorporative economy, is unstable. As the remarkable French urban sociologist Paul Virilio has said, it is a polity based on speed, instant communication, distant reach, constant emergency, insecurity induced by mounting crises, some of which lead to war. In such circumstances the rapid occupation of real as well as public space—colonization—becomes the central militaristic prerogative of the modern state, as the United States showed when it dispatched a huge army to the Arabian Gulf, and commandeered the media to help carry out the operation. As against that, Virilio suggests that the modernist project of liberating language/speech (la libération de la parole) has a parallel in the liberation of critical spaces—hospitals, universities, theaters, factories, churches, empty buildings; in both, the fundamental transgressive act is to inhabit the normally uninhabited. As examples, Virilio cites the cases of people whose current status is the consequence either of decolonization (migrant workers, refugees, Gastarbeiter) or of major demographic and political shifts (Blacks, immigrants, urban squatters, students, popular insurrections, etc.). These constitute a real alternative to the authority of the state.

If the 1960s are now remembered as a decade of European and American mass demonstrations (the university and anti-war uprisings chief among them), the 1980s must surely be the decade of mass uprisings outside the Western metropolis. Iran, the Philippines, Argentina, Korea, Pakistan, Algeria, China, South Africa, virtually all of Eastern Europe, the Israeli-occupied territories of Palestine: these are some of the most impressive crowd-activated sites, each of them crammed with largely unarmed civilian populations, well past the point of enduring the imposed deprivations, tyranny, and inflexibility of governments that had ruled them for too long. Most memorable are, on the one hand, the resourcefulness and the startling symbolism of the protests themselves (the stone-throwing Palestinian youths, for example, or the swaying dancing South African groups, or the wall-traversing East Germans) and, on the other, the offensive brutality or collapse and ignominious departure of the governments.

Allowing for great differences in ideology, these mass protests have all challenged something very basic to every art and theory of government, the principle of confinement. To be governed must be counted, taxed, educated, and of course ruled in regulated places (house, school, hospital, work site), whose ultimate extension is represented at its most simple and severe by the prison or mental hospital, as Michel Foucault argued. True, there was a carnivalesque aspect to the milling crowds in Gaza or in Wenceslas and Tianamen squares, but the consequences of sustained mass unconfined and unsettled existence were only a little less dramatic (and dispiriting) in the 1980s than before. The unresolved plight of the Palestinians speaks directly of an undomesticated cause and a rebellious people paying a very heavy price for their resistance. And there are other examples: refugees and “boat people,” those unresting and vulnerable itinerants; the starving populations of the Southern Hemisphere, the destitute but insistent homeless who, like so many Bartlebys, shadow the Christmas shoppers in Western cities; the undocumented immigrants and exploited “guest workers” who provide cheap and usually seasonal labor. Between the extremes of disinterested, challenging urban mobs and the floods of semi-forgotten, uncared-for people, the world’s secular and religious authorities have sought new, or renewed, modes of governance.

None has seemed so easily available, so conveniently attractive as appeals to tradition, national or religious identity, patriotism. And because these appeals are amplified and disseminated by a perfected media system addressing mass cultures, they have been strikingly, not to say frighteningly effective. When in the spring of 1986 the Reagan administration decided to deal “terrorism” a blow, the raid on Libya was timed to occur exactly as prime-time national evening news began. “America strikes back” was answered resoundingly throughout the Muslim world with bloodcurdling appeals to “Islam,” which in turn provoked an avalanche of images, writings, and postures in the “West” underscoring the value of “our” Judeo-Christian (Western, liberal, democratic) heritage and the nefariousness, evil, cruelty, and immaturity of theirs (Islamic, Third World, etc.).

The raid on Libya is instructive not only because of the spectacular mirror reflection between the two sides, but also because they both combined righteous authority and retributive violence in a way that was unquestioned and then often replicated. Truly this has been the age of Ayatollahs, in which a phalanx of guardians (Khomeini, the Pope, Margaret Thatcher) simplify and protect one or another creed, essence, primordial faith. One fundamentalism invidiously attacks the others in the name of sanity, freedom, and goodness. A curious paradox is that religious fervor seems almost always to obscure notions of the sacred or divine, as if those could not survive in the overheated, largely secular atmosphere of fundamentalist
combat. You would not think of invoking God's merciful nature when you were mobilized by Khomeini (or for that matter, by the Arab champion against “the Persians” in the nastiest of the 1980s wars, Saddam): you served, you fought, you fulminated. Similarly, oversized champions of the Cold War like Reagan and Thatcher demanded, with a righteousness and power that few clerics could match, obedient service against the Empire of Evil.

The space between the bashing of other religions or cultures and deeply conservative self-praise has not been filled with edifying analysis or discussion. In the reams of print about Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, only a tiny proportion discussed the book *itself*: those who opposed it and recommended its burning and its author’s death refused to read it, while those who supported his freedom to write left it self-righteously at that. Much of the passionate controversy about “cultural literacy” in the United States and Europe was about what *should* be read—the twenty or thirty essential books—not about *how* they should be read. In many American universities, the frequent right-thinking response to the demands of newly empowered marginal groups was to say “show me the African (or Asian, or feminine) Proust” or “if you tamper with the canon of Western literature you are likely to be promoting the return of polygamy and slavery.” Whether or not such *buteur* and so caricatural a view of historical process were supposed to exemplify the humanism and generosity of “our” culture, these sages did not volunteer.

Their assertions joined a mass of other cultural affirmations whose feature was that they had been pronounced by experts and professionals. At the same time, as often noted on the Left and the Right, the general secular intellectual disappeared. The deaths in the 1980s of Jean-Paul Sartre, Roland Barthes, I. F. Stone, Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams, and C.L.R. James, mark the passing of an old order; they had been figures of learning and authority, whose general scope over many fields gave them more than professional competence, that is, a critical intellectual style. The technocrats, in contrast, as Lyotard says in *Postmodern Condition*, are principally competent to solve local problems, not to ask the big questions set by the grand narratives of emancipation and enlightenment, and there are also the carefully accredited policy experts who serve the security managers who have guided international affairs.

With the virtual exhaustion of grand systems and total theories (the Cold War, the Bretton Woods entente, Soviet and Chinese collectivized economies, Third World anti-imperialist nationalism), we enter a new period of vast uncertainty. This is what Mikhail Gorbachev so powerfully represented until he was succeeded by the far less certain Boris Yeltsin. *Perestroika* and *glasnost*, the key words associated with Gorbachev's reforms, expressed dish-

satisfaction with the past and, at most, vague hopes about the future, but they were neither theories nor visions. His restless travels gradually revealed a new map of the world, most of it almost frighteningly interdependent, most of it intellectually, philosophically, ethnically, and even imaginatively uncharted. Large masses of people, greater in number and hopes than ever before, want to eat better and more frequently; large numbers also want to move, talk, sing, dress. If the old systems cannot respond to those demands, the gigantic media-hastened images that provoke administered violence and rabid xenophobia will not serve either. They can be counted on to work for a moment, but then they lose their mobilizing power. There are too many contradictions between reductive schemes and overwhelming impulses and \drivers.\ The old invented histories and traditions and efforts to rule are giving way to newer, more elastic and relaxed theories of what is so discrepant and intense in the contemporary moment. In the West, post-modernism has seized upon the ahistorical weightlessness, consumerism, and spectacle of the new order. To it are affiliated other ideas like post-Marxism and post-structuralism, varieties of what the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo describes as “the weak thought” of “the end of modernity.” Yet in the Arab and Islamic world many artists and intellectuals like Adonis, Elias Khoury, Kamal Abu Deeb, Muhammad Arkoun, and Jamal Ben Sheik are still concerned with *modernity* itself, still far from exhausted, still a major challenge in a culture dominated by *turf* (heritage) and orthodoxy. This is similarly the case in the Caribbean, East Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent; these movements intersect culturally in a fascinating cosmopolitan space animated by internationally prominent writers like Salman Rushdie, Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Milan Kundera, who intervene forcefully not only as novelists but also as commentators and essayists. And their debate over what is modern or post-modern is joined by the anxious, urgent question of how we are to modernize, given the cataclysmic upheavals the world is experiencing as it moves into the *fin de siècle*, that is, how we are going to keep up life itself when the quotidian demands of the present threaten to outstrip the human presence?

The case of Japan is extraordinarily symptomatic, as it is described by the Japanese-American intellectual Masao Miyoshi. Remark, he says, that, as everyone knows, according to studies of “the enigma of Japanese power,” Japanese banks, corporations, and real-estate conglomerates now far overshadow (indeed dwarf) their American counterparts. Real-estate values in Japan are many times higher than in the United States, once considered the very citadel of capital. The world's ten largest banks are mostly Japanese, and much of the United States' huge foreign debt is held by Japan (and
Taiwan). Although there was some prefiguring of this in the brief ascendency of Arab oil-producing states in the 1970s, Japanese international economic power is unparalleled, especially, as Miyoshi says, in being tied to an almost total absence of international cultural power. Japan's contemporary verbal culture is austere, even impoverished—dominated by talk shows, comic books, relentless conferences and panel discussions. Miyoshi diagnoses a new problem in culture as a corollary to the country's staggering financial resources, an absolute disparity between the total novelty and global dominance in the economic sphere, and the impoverishing retreat and dependence on the West in cultural discourse.

From the details of daily life to the immense range of global forces (including what has been called "the death of nature")—all these importune the troubled soul, and there is little to mitigate their power or the crises they create. The two general areas of agreement nearly everywhere are that personal freedoms should be safeguarded, and that the earth's environment should be defended against further decline. Democracy and ecology, each providing a local context and plenty of concrete combat zones, are set against a cosmic backdrop. Whether in the struggle of nationalities or in the problems of deforestation and global warming, the interactions between individual identity (embodied in minor activities like smoking or using of aerosol cans) and the general framework are tremendously direct, and the time-honored conventions of art, history, and philosophy do not seem well-suited to them. Much of what was so exciting for four decades about Western modernism and its aftermath—in, say, the elaborate interpretative strategies of critical theory or the self-consciousness of literary and musical forms—seems almost quaintly abstract, desperately Eurocentric today. More reliable now are the reports from the front line where struggles are being fought between domestic tyrants and idealist oppositions, hybrid combinations of realism and fantasy, cartographic and archeological descriptions, explorations in mixed forms (essay, video or film, photograph, memoir, story, aphorism) of unhoused exile experiences.

The major task, then, is to match the new economic and socio-political dislocations and configurations of our time with the startling realities of human interdependence on a world scale. If the Japanese, East European, Islamic, and Western instances express anything in common, it is that a new critical consciousness is needed, and this can be achieved only by revised attitudes to education. Merely to urge students to insist on one's own identity, history, tradition, uniqueness may initially get them to name their basic requirements for democracy and for the right to an assured, decently humane existence. But we need to go on and to situate these in a geography of other identities, peoples, cultures, and then to study how, despite their differences, they have always overlapped one another, through unhierarchic influence, crossing, incorporation, recollection, deliberate forgetfulness, and, of course, conflict. We are nowhere near "the end of history," but we are still far from free from monopolizing attitudes toward it. These have not been much good in the past—notwithstanding the rallying cries of the politics of separatist identity, multiculturalism, minority discourse—and the quicker we teach ourselves to find alternatives, the better and safer. The fact is, we are mixed in with one another in ways that most national systems of education have not dreamed of. To match knowledge in the arts and sciences with these integrative realities is, I believe, the intellectual and cultural challenge of moment.

The steady critique of nationalism, which derives from the various theorists of liberation I have discussed, should not be forgotten, for we must not condemn ourselves to repeat the imperial experience. In the redefined and yet very close contemporary relationship between culture and imperialism, a relationship that enables disquieting forms of domination, how can we sustain the liberating energies released by the great decolonizing resistance movements and the mass uprisings of the 1980s? Can these energies elude the homogenizing processes of modern life, hold in abeyance the interventions of the new imperial centrality?

"All things counter, original, spare, strange": Gerard Manley Hopkins in "Pied Beauty." The question is, Where? And where to, we might ask, is there a place for that astonishingly harmonious vision of time intersecting with the timeless that occurs at the end of "Little Gidding," a moment that Eliot saw as words in

An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together.

Virilio's notion is counter-habitation: to live as migrants do in habitually uninhabited but nevertheless public spaces. A similar notion occurs in Mille Plateaux (volume 2 of the Anti-Oedipe) by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. A great deal of this immensely rich book is not easily accessible, but I have found it mysteriously suggestive. The chapter entitled "Traité de nomadologie: La Machine de guerre," builds on Virilio's work by extending his ideas on movement and space to a highly eccentric study of an itinerant war machine. This quite original treatise contains a metaphor about a disciplined kind of intellectual mobility in an age of institutionalization, regimentation, co-option. The war machine, Deleuze and Guattari say,
can be assimilated to the military powers of the state—but, since it is fundamentally a separate entity, need not be, any more than the spirit's nomadic wanderings need always be put at the service of institutions. The war machine's source of strength is not only its nomadic freedom but also its metallurgical art—which Deleuze and Guattari compare to the art of musical composition—by which materials are forged, fashioned "beyond separate forms; [this metallurgy, like music] stresses the continuing development of form itself, and beyond individually differing materials it stresses the continuing variation within matter itself."64 Precision, concreteness, continuity, form—all these have the attributes of a nomadic practice whose power, Virilio says, is not aggressive but transgressive.65

We can perceive this truth on the political map of the contemporary world. For surely it is one of the unhappiest characteristics of the age to have produced more refugees, migrants, displaced persons, and exiles than ever before in history, most of them as an accompaniment to and, ironically enough, as afterthoughts of great post-colonial and imperial conflicts. As the struggle for independence produced new states and new boundaries, it also produced homeless wanderers, nomads, and vagrants, unassimilated to the emerging structures of institutional power, rejected by the established order for their intransigence and obdurate rebelliousness. And insofar as these people exist between the old and the new, between the old empire and the new state, their condition articulates the tensions, irresolutions, and contradictions in the overlapping territories shown on the cultural map of imperialism.

There is a great difference, however, between the optimistic mobility, the intellectual liveliness, and "the logic of daring" described by the various theoreticians on whose work I have drawn, and the massive dislocations, waste, misery, and horrors endured in our century's migrations and mutilated lives. Yet it is no exaggeration to say that liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages. From this perspective then all things are indeed counter, original, spare, strange. From this perspective also, one can see "the complete consort dancing together" contrapuntally. And while it would be the rankest Panglossian dishonesty to say that the bravura performances of the intellectual exile and the miseries of the displaced person or refugee are the same, it is possible, I think, to regard the intellectual as first distilling then articulating the predicaments that disfigure modernity—mass deportation, imprisonment, population transfer, collective dispossession, and forced immigrations.

"The past life of émigrés is, as we know, annulled," says Adorno in Minima Moralia, subtitled Reflections from a Damaged Life (Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben). Why? "Because anything that is not reified, cannot be counted and measured, ceases to exist"66 or, as he says later, is consigned to mere "background." Although the disabling aspects of this fate are manifest, its virtues or possibilities are worth exploring. Thus the émigré consciousness—a mind of winter, in Wallace Stevens's phrase—discovers in its marginality that "a gaze averted from the beaten track, a hatred of brutality, a search for fresh concepts not yet encompassed by the general pattern, is the last hope for thought."67 Adorno's general pattern is what in another place he calls the "administered world" or, insofar as the irresistible dominants in culture are concerned, "the consciousness industry." There is then not just the negative advantage of refuge in the émigré's eccentricity; there is also the positive benefit of challenging the system, describing it in language unavailable to those it has already subdued:

In an intellectual hierarchy which constantly makes everyone answerable, unanswerability alone can call the hierarchy directly by its name. The circulation sphere, whose stigmata are borne by intellectual outsiders, opens a last refuge to the mind that it barter away, at the very moment when refuge no longer exists. He who offers for sale something unique that no one wants to buy, represents, even against his will, freedom from exchange.68

These are certainly minimal opportunities, although a few pages later Adorno expands the possibility of freedom by describing a form of expression whose opacity, obscurity, and deviousness—the absence of "the full transparency of its logical genesis"—move away from the dominant system, enacting in its "inadequacy" a measure of liberation:

This inadequacy resembles that of life, which describes a wavering, deviating line, disappointing by comparison with its premises, and yet which only in this actual course, always less than it should be, is able, under given conditions of existence, to represent an unregimented one.69

Too privatized, we are likely to say about this respite from regimentation. Yet we can rediscover it not only in the obdurately subjective, even negative Adorno, but in the public accents of an Islamic intellectual like Ali Shariati,

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a prime force in the early days of the Iranian Revolution, when his attack on “the true, straight path, this smooth and sacred highway”—organized orthodoxy—contrasted with the deviations of constant migration:

man, this dialectical phenomenon, is compelled to be always in motion. Man, then, can never attain a final resting place and take up residence in God. How disgraceful, then, are all fixed standards. Who can ever fix a standard? Man is a “choice,” a struggle, a constant becoming. He is an infinite migration, a migration within himself, from clay to God; he is a migrant within his own soul.62

Here we have a genuine potential for an emergent non-coercive culture (although Shariati speaks only of “man” and not of “woman”), which in its awareness of concrete obstacles and concrete steps, exactness without vulgarity, precision but not pedantry, shares the sense of a beginning which occurs in all genuinely radical efforts to start again—e.g., for example, the tentative authorization of feminine experience in Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, or the fabulous reorientation of time and character giving rise to the divided generations of Midnight’s Children, or the remarkable universalizing of the African-American experience as it emerges in such brilliant detail in Toni Morrison’s Tar Baby and Beloved. The push or tension comes from the surrounding environment—the imperialist power that would otherwise compel you to disappear or to accept some miniature version of yourself as a doctrine to be passed out on a course syllabus. These are not new master discourses, strong new narratives, but, as in John Berger’s program, another way of telling. When photographs or texts are used merely to establish identity and presence—to give us merely representative images of the Woman, or the Indian—they enter what Berger calls a control system. With their innately ambiguous, hence negative and anti-narrativist waywardness not denied, however, they permit unregimented subjectivity to have a social function: “fragile images [family photographs] often carried next to the heart, or placed by the side of the bed, are used to refer to that which historical time has no right to destroy.”63

From another perspective, the exilic, the marginal, subjective, migratory energies of modern life, which the liberationist struggles have deployed when these energies are too toughly resilient to disappear, have also emerged in what Immanuel Wallerstein calls “anti-systemic movements.” Remember that the main feature of imperialist expansion historically was accumulation, a process that accelerated during the twentieth century. Wallerstein’s argument is that at bottom capital accumulation is irrational; its additive, acquisitive gains continue unchecked even though its costs—in maintaining the process, in paying for wars to protect it, in “buying off” and co-opting “intermediate cadres,” in living in an atmosphere of permanent crisis—are exorbitant, not worth the gains. Thus, Wallerstein says, “the very superstructure [of state power and the national cultures that support the idea of state power] that was put in place to maximize the free flow of the factors of production in the world-economy is the nursery of national movements that mobilize against the inequalities inherent in the world system.”65 Those people compelled by the system to play subordinate or imprisoning roles within it emerge as conscious antagonists, disrupting it, proposing claims, advancing arguments that dispute the totalitarian compulsions of the world market. Not everything can be bought off.

All these hybrid counter-energies, at work in many fields, individuals, and moments provide a community or culture made up of numerous anti-systemic hints and practices for collective human existence (and neither doctrines nor complete theories) that is not based on coercion or domination. They fueled the uprisings of the 1980s, about which I spoke earlier. The authoritative, compelling image of the empire, which crept into and overtook so many procedures of intellectual mastery that are central in modern culture, finds its opposite in the renewable, almost sporty discontinuities of intellectual and secular impurities—mixed genres, unexpected combinations of tradition and novelty, political experiences based on communities of effort and interpretation (in the broadest sense of the word) rather than classes or corporations of possession, appropriation, and power.

I find myself returning again and again to a hauntingly beautiful passage by Hugo of St. Victor, a twelfth-century monk from Saxony:

It is therefore, a source of great virtue for the practiced mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about in visible and transitory things, so that afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. The person 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 place. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong person has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.

Erich Auerbach, the great German scholar who spent the years of World War Two as an exile in Turkey, cites this passage as a model for anyone—man and woman—wishing to transcend the restraints of imperial or national or provincial limits. Only through this attitude can a historian, for example, begin to grasp human experience and its written records in all their diversity and particularity; otherwise one would remain committed more to the
exclusions and reactions of prejudice than to the negative freedom of real
knowledge. But note that Hugo twice makes it clear that the “strong” or
“perfect” person achieves independence and detachment by working through
attachments, not by rejecting them. Exile is predicated on the existence of,
love for, and a real bond with one’s native place; the universal truth of exile
is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an
unexpected, unwelcome loss. Regard experiences then as if they were about
to disappear: what is it about them that anchors or roots them in reality?
What would you save of them, what would you give up, what would you
recover? To answer such questions you must have the independence and
detachment of someone whose homeland is “sweet,” but whose actual condition
makes it impossible to recapture that sweetness, and even less possible
to derive satisfaction from substitutes furnished by illusion or dogma,
whether deriving from pride in one’s heritage or from certainty about who
“we” are.

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or
Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed
into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism
consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But
its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they
were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet
just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures
and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long
traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies,
but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting
on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was
about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things; in Eliot’s
phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the “other echoes [that] inhabit the
garden.” It is more rewarding—and more difficult—to think concretely and
sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about “us.” But this
also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them
in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how “our” culture or
country is number one (or not number one, for that matter). For the intellec-
tual there is quite enough of value to do without that.
CHAPTER FOUR

FREEDOM FROM DOMINATION IN THE FUTURE

34. A very compelling account of this is given by Jonathan Rée in "Internationality," Radical Philosophy, 60 (Spring 1994), 3-11.
42. Ibid., p. 261.
50. Eqbal Ahmad, "From Potato Sack to Potato Mash: The Contemporary Crisis of the Third World," Arab Studies Quarterly 4, No. 3 (Summer 1980), 325-332.
51. Ibid., p. 331.
57. Virilio, L'Insecurite du territoire, p. 84.
58. Adorno, Minima Moralia, pp. 46-47.
59. Ibid., pp. 67-68.
60. Ibid., p. 68.
61. Ibid., p. 81.
63. This is described at length in my Beginnings: Intention and Method (1975; rpt. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).