

# OPPRESSED MEMORIES

*Out of Place: A Memoir*, by Edward W. Said.  
New York: Knopf. 320 pages. \$26.95.

## Benjamin Taylor

Throughout his career, Edward Said has provoked strong responses. Like his admired models—Lukács, Sartre, Adorno, Foucault, Chomsky—he is not just a theorist or a critic but a highly public intellectual. His impassioned advocacy for the Palestinian cause has earned him admiration, but also lively scorn, as a recent, widely publicized attack in *Commentary* attests.

Said's new book calls itself, too modestly, a memoir. At over 300 closely printed pages, *Out of Place* is a full-scale autobiography covering the first thirty years of the author's life: his childhood in Cairo; his visits to extended family in Jerusalem; his summers in a Lebanese hill town; and his higher education and early teaching experience in America. (I should say at the outset that I was a student of Professor Said's at Columbia, and will always remember his extraordinary gifts as a teacher. Tough and tender, rigorous and beguiling, impatient and generous, he made you fear and like him.)

His overriding subject in sixteen previous books, beginning with a doctoral dissertation on Joseph Conrad, has been imperialism, particularly how the great European empires have understood their colonial subjects. He is our leading critic of the ways in which Western literature and scholarship have represented the colonized.

Said was born into a family more or less "out of place" wherever they found themselves: Palestinian, Lebanese, but American on their passports; Anglican in their worship, but otherwise unconnected to England; Francophone, Anglophone, but Arabic-speaking amongst themselves—custom-built Levantines, in a word. *Out of Place* tells, sometimes quite movingly, of the author's passage from this hothouse home life into a larger, non-Arab world wherein he finds himself reduced to stereotypes. The quickness to indignation in Said's literary and political writings clearly has its roots in a visceral early experience of knowing the colonizer well, only to be ill-known in return.

Whether as an embattled boy in the English and American schools of Cairo or as a university professor at Columbia, Said has remained—has, I think, *chosen* to remain—the misunderstood stranger. But now, at age sixty-four, under the impact of life-threatening illness, he evidently wishes to make public what has hitherto been private, to be known to us as he has known himself.

He describes, in the early chapters of *Out of Place*, an upper-middle-class rearing few will envy—the burden of expectation onerous, the criticisms picayune and mean-spirited, the surveillance constant and sometimes plain crazy. Said recounts a scene in which his parents rage at their pubescent son for failing to have semen stains in his pajama bottoms. Must be abusing himself, they reason. (Can Said *père* really have commanded, in English, Arabic, or any other language, "Have a wet dream!" as the author claims?) The musically and intellectually gifted son of privilege is a constant provocation to his pragmatic,

self-made father, and is frequently beaten, even into young manhood. The author's mother, tenderly manipulative, unworldly, unquestioningly loyal to her much older husband, seems equally determined to make a permanent child of their son. Said tells us that these family depictions are the outcome of a psychoanalysis. Plainly so, and while writing them down may have been therapeutic, they are too drawn-out and have an unironical self-involvement that this reader, at least, found trying.

Instinctive suspicion of authority has been Said's dominant trait as a writer, and *Out of Place* misses no opportunity for settling accounts with the powerful, great and small: Miss Clark, a teacher who sided against him at the Cairo School for American Children; Michael Shaloub, head boy at Victoria College, a dashing and utterly sadistic older student who grew up to be famous as Omar Sharif; Harry Truman, who had the effrontery to favor the establishment of a Jewish homeland; Jim Murray, a counselor at Camp Maranacook in Maine, who upbraided young Edward for sneaking an extra hot dog at a cookout; Eleanor Roosevelt, who excluded Palestinian refugees from her wide embrace; Professor I.A. Richards, who had the bad grace to lose his marbles before Said arrived at Harvard for graduate school—all these get what is coming to them.

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Referring to the fall of Palestine, Said speaks of a "broken trajectory imposed on so many of us by the events of 1948." He is eloquent about the plight of Palestinian refugees at the end of the British Mandate, less so about Jews expropriated and forced to flee Arab lands in the succession of conflicts that followed. At a low point in the book, he attacks Martin Luther King, Jr. for expressing too great a satisfaction at the outcome of the Six-Day War. What we learn from *Out of Place* is that "the events of 1948"—the establishment of the state of Israel and the immediate declaration of war on Israel by a co-federation of Arab states—did not adversely impact the Saids' business interests or their well-being. No, it was the arrival of Gamal Abdel Nasser and "Arab socialism" that did that. A little less vitriol about Brits, Zionists, and Americans and a little more about the tragedy of Arab misrule would not have come amiss in Said's account.

The greatest modern autobiographers rejoice in the difficult awareness that, while one is inevitably the protagonist of one's own story, adjacent lives are as real and as sovereign in their interest. Out of such awareness spring the humor and irony that are fundamental to great autobiography. In a book such as Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* the reader is made to experience the independent reality of those who have peopled the author's life; they are not just there to get their comeuppance.

Reading *Out of Place*, one wishes in vain for such empathetic discoveries. Instead, a tone of peremptory self-justification prevails, which sometimes degenerates into chilling detachment (a quality, to be fair, that the author recognizes in himself). One revealing passage, near the end of the book, tells of a terrible collision Said had with a motorcyclist while traveling in Switzerland. The man on the bike was killed, Said injured and transported to a hospital. In the three remaining pages of the book, he has, astonishingly, not another word to say about the dead man. But after such an experience, regardless of who was at fault, does not one have (as any of the great autobiographers would know, as the Conrad scholar ought to know) a secret sharer? □

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