

Humanism for whom?

Edward Said invents some goals

Humanism and Democratic Criticism

Edward W. Said

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Reviewed by Jimmy Y.K. Ng

This book reexamines and reformulates humanism in 21st Century academic and political spheres. Damage was done to the study of humanism by structuralists and poststructuralists, especially the works of French theorists like Foucault and Barthes, who, continuing from Nietzsche, Freud and Marx, brought about the depersonalisation of the individual artist and author. Furthermore, over the past few decades, the humanities have lost eminence and have been taken over by fashionable newer subjects such as cultural studies, postcolonialism, and ethnic studies, to the point that they are now both harmless and powerless theoretically and practically.

Said's definition of humanism is open, democratic and secular. It is a "process of unending disclosure, discovery, self-criticism, and liberation". The heart of humanism is critique, which "is a form of democratic freedom and as a continuous practice of questioning and of accumulating knowledge that is open to ... the constituent historical realities of the post-Cold War world" (p.47). The formalist and historical study of language and literature, or philology, is Said's chosen tool of criticism and is therefore also crucial to humanistic knowledge. Words form reality and, adopting the Nietzschean slogan that truth is "a mobile army of metaphors and metonyms", reality lies in words. At the same time, since a rigorous dialectic between the socioeconomic circumstances of an individual and his or her own uniquely creative and intellectual output is both ineluctable and important to humanistic discovery, we would need to engage, in our philological exercise, with the world of words and the world that controls, contains and produces these words. Finally, we would try to see the part (the words and the text that contain them) in relation to the whole (the socioeconomic conditions), albeit incompletely.

Said argues that we must not only read, but reread texts, to get to their meaning. Distinguishing himself from the Foucauldian view that knowledge serves power and the early Derridean concept of semantic undecidability, Said concludes, firstly, that all representations carry an essential 'worldliness' in the sense of them being contaminated and involved in power, position and interests and, secondly, that whilst we cannot achieve total understanding of words and texts, we can achieve an adequately critical understanding "that may never be completed but can certainly be provisionally affirmed" (p.67). 'Critical receptivity' includes reflection, research, inquiry, dismantling, unpacking, documentation, and refutation, and its open character is consistent with Said's view of history as being incomplete and ongoing.

Said claims that it takes a human mind to understand the words of another human mind. The mind of a humanist demystifies and makes transparent the meaning and origin of words and the ideas that they carry; the humanist is a questioner, one who cultivates a sense of multiple worlds and complex traditions, embraces catholic inclusiveness rather than elitist exclusiveness, and experiences, as both reader and intellectual, a sense of belonging and detachment with respect to the world of the text. Old humanism, according to Said, was Eurocentric and nationalist such that it failed to have a genuine cosmopolitan, internationalist perspective and an intellectual curiosity that a new humanism should have that are crucial to engaging with an increasingly globalised world of the 21st Century.

The philology of Erich Auerbach in *Mimesis* is the focus of the second last chapter. This text, according to Said, elucidates the "relationships between books and the world they belonged to" and those "between the rhetorical style of the passage [of a text] and its sociopolitical context" (p.87). It is Auerbach's study of history and practice of historicism that Said wishes to draw our attention to, in particular the complex relationship between 'reality' and its representation that defines historicism. Auerbach is a humanist for he approves Vico's view of history: that men made history and since men can understand what men make, therefore men can understand history. God or any form of deity did not create history: instead it is a product of history. This secular notion of history is consistent with a secular humanism.

History can be examined only by man who must adopt the point of view of the writer in order to understand the writer's representation of reality that we call history. History is therefore simultaneously a real event and a textual event. Taking Said's Nietzschean view of truth and reality, it is only consistent that no history is not mediated, ontologically and epistemologically, through words, the reflective mind, and knowledge, all of which exist within the human writer. Auerbach interprets Peter's denial of Jesus as examples of movement from the real, local and everyday *event* to the *world or universe* of the sublime, the transformative and the beyond. This movement characterises most if not all of Auerbach's interpretations of biblical events. The ensuing historicism that occupies the second half of *Mimesis* is significant to the humanist.

The final chapter of the book gives instruction on what writers and intellectuals can do to engage with the State and the new public sphere dominated by globalisation. Writers and intellectuals must communicate, disseminate and produce ideas. Said says that their goal is social justice and economic equality, as well as to hypothesise "a better situation from the known historical and social facts" (p.140), yet he says that there is no teleology or grand theory for what an intellectual can do, since human history does not move toward some utopia. Human rights are not grammatical but real, yet Said says a humanist must invent his or her own goals, 'invent' meaning to rediscover or uncover goals that may have already been expressed by previous intellectuals in history. He ends this book with an affirmative, hopeful, yet somewhat ambiguous thought on the fate of the intellectual:

I conclude with the thought that the intellectual's provisional home is the domain of an exigent, resistant, intransigent art into which, alas, one can neither retreat nor search for solutions. But only in that precarious exilic realm can one first truly grasp the difficulty of what cannot be grasped and then go forth to try anyway. (*HDC*, 144)

The book raises a few critical issues. The human mind, the representation of reality, and what we all presuppose as the 'real' undergo the usual commingling such that the

functions of each are confused. The real is to be represented, representation is to represent, even if it is true that the representation—visual or textual, it does not matter—itsself gets caught up in its own representation. When we discuss history, we presuppose two things: an absolute ontological past prior to textualisation, and an epistemological past that exists through textualisation. Said assumes the latter to be the exclusive definition of history when the former is its hidden support. There is nothing outside of the text (or context), Derrida said, and Said seems to be in agreement with this at first. But if reality lies in words, how is Said able to argue that human rights are not grammatical but real? What about social justice and economic equality? Are these goals of reality not also real and not grammatical?

If history lies in the hands of men and the goals of humanity are social justice and economic equality, why does Said say that we must invent (in terms of rediscovering) our own goals? Suppose we are to *rediscover* our own goals, does that not imply, if not concede, an origin to these goals? If so, what is this origin? Suppose the origin of these goals is a human one, then the question is why are these goals important to this world? And to question why these goals are important is to question simply the goals of humanism all over again, bringing us to the beginning of a vicious circle. Since history does not move toward a utopia but is nevertheless ongoing, then it is inevitable that, in a secular view of humanism, history lies in the hands of men and men alone. Writers, intellectuals, and all others with a humanistic mindset must make history and make the world a better place to live in.

Perhaps the underlying problem in these questions is the source of the conditions of conceiving the purpose and agency of humanism. If it is secular, then God is no longer such a source. Christians ought not to take a secular view of humanism and, contrary to Said, presuppose God's active involvement in history. For Said, the incompleteness of history leaves no teleology for humanism, for a Christian, this incompleteness should be coupled with the hope of Jesus Christ's return and the restoration of this world.

Auerbach's interpretation of biblical stories especially in the four Gospels serves to show that historicism is operative but is itself not theological in that it does not study God's Word as centered on the Gospel of Jesus and the Kingdom that he proclaimed. Said's own view of Christianity does not go beyond his views on religious fundamentalism, and

its detriment to the notions of humanistic inclusiveness and universal tolerance, and on the Christian Church as a historical product and a case study for the cause and formation of the canonicity of old, traditional humanism.

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