

Counterpoint, Late Style, Polyphony

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JEANNE Morefield opens her new book, *Unsettling the World*, with poet Mahmoud Darwish’s elegy for Edward Said.¹ The elegy, ‘Tibaq’ or ‘Antithesis’, is a good introduction to the motif which runs through Morefield’s book and holds it together: Said’s idea of ‘contrapuntal’ reading and writing, by which the dominant narratives of the imperial core and the perspectives of the colonised are analysed simultaneously. Darwish not only mirrors Said’s use of counterpoint in his poem; he was himself an important influence on it. Said read and translated, for example, Darwish’s Palestinian Declaration of Independence, a document which communicates well the kind of composite and exilic Palestinian identity advanced by the PLO during that period.²

Edward Said takes the notion of contrapuntal analysis from music—from his life as a pianist—where counterpoint refers to the relationship between two or more melodic lines, simultaneously independent and interdependent: they create a higher harmonic whole, but crucially there is also an element of friction, the possibility of notes being set against one another. Counterpoint puts us in the realm, then, of what the Soviet literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin called ‘polyphony’, which he associated primarily with Dostoevsky’s novels: “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses”³ which, in dialogue, created a truth that could not be contained by any one consciousness. Said suggests, however, that this truth might be contained within the contrapuntal consciousness of the exile.⁴ Where Bakhtin thinks that Dostoevsky *creates* this kind of polyphony, Said uses counterpoint in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) as a practice of criticism, as a means of exploring the imperial connections contained—but half-buried—within a novel like *Mansfield Park*.⁵

How useful is counterpoint for political theorists? Said and Morefield

¹ A version of this commentary was first presented on 6 March 2023 in New College, Oxford at a roundtable on Jeanne Morefield, *Unsettling the World: Edward Said and Political Theory* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2022).

² Karma Nabulsi provides an excellent Rousseauian reading of the text in her ‘Being Palestinian’, *Government and Opposition* 38, no. 5 (2003): 479–496.

³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 6–7.

⁴ We might think too here about W. E. B. Du Bois’s conception of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903).

⁵ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

make a compelling case for it. My own attraction to it and reservations about it are inseparable. Counterpoint combines lots of different kinds of relations in one: it simultaneously suggests a shared whole—a shared history—while also assuming co-constitutive differentiation, identity-formation by opposition, one melody defining itself in opposition to the other. Describing the contrapuntal connections between Palestinian and Israeli identity, Morefield writes:

...for Said, Palestinian and Israeli identities have co-evolved through the unfolding colonialist logic of the mandate period, the massive immigration of displaced Holocaust survivors from Europe, the Palestinian exodus of 1948, the 1967 war, the first Intifada, the rise of Hamas, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority, the ongoing land dispossession, and the brutal geographic incising and settler colonial dispossession that continues to this day.⁶

Of course, violence has escalated even further since the most recent Netanyahu cabinet was formed in December of 2022—the most far-right government in Israeli history, which has described West Bank settlement expansion as its top priority.⁷ Even parts of the IDF are horrified by the scale of the violence; a senior IDF general described the march on Hawara as a “pogrom”; the Finance Minister, meanwhile, a Religious Zionist, has said that the village should be “wiped out” by the Israeli state.⁸ At the same time, a contrapuntal approach is supposed to evoke a kind of worldly humanism, emphasising cosmopolitan connections between human cultures and their shared inheritances.

Holding together seemingly impossible tensions is in some sense the point of a contrapuntal analysis. But are there not political limits to such an approach? Consider, for example, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra,⁹ founded by Said and the Argentine-Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim in 1999, which brought together young Arab and Israeli musicians into one orchestra. As Timothy Brennan documents in his recent biography of Said, this project was hugely important to Edward and Mariam Said, with Mariam keeping the torch alive after Edward died. It was created, however, before the call for BDS; the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel has since criticised the orchestra for normalising relations with Israel. Most of Said’s other family members have also been critical of it. This dispute perhaps gets at two (incompatible?) versions of counterpoint: one which

⁶ Morefield, *Unsettling the World*, 47.

⁷ For context: this commentary was first presented on 6 March 2023.

⁸ Al Jazeera and News Agencies, ‘Palestine’s Huwara should be wiped out: Top Israeli minister’, 1 March 2023: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/3/1/israel-arrests-settlers-after-anti-palestinian-pogrom>

⁹ The orchestra was named after Goethe’s poetry collection inspired by Hafez, the *West-östlicher Divan* (1819).

emphasises a harmonious vision of cooperation—Mariam Said has invoked counterpoint to defend the orchestra’s philosophy—and another which reveals discordant, atonal opposition.

Said’s final book *On Late Style*, compiled posthumously by Michael Wood and published in 2006, argued that ‘lateness’, like exile, can also give rise to a plurality of vision, a contrapuntal awareness of simultaneous dimensions and a home which is irrevocably lost. In these essays we see Said grapple with Adorno most seriously—in an interview he joked that he was the “only true follower” of Adorno.¹⁰ On Adorno’s reading, as Beethoven approached death his work proclaimed, in Rose Subotnik’s words, that ‘no synthesis is conceivable.’¹¹ Instead, there are only the ‘remains of a synthesis, the vestige of an individual human subject sorely aware of the wholeness, and consequently the survival, that has eluded it forever.’¹² In Said’s words:

For Adorno...[Beethoven’s last works] constitute an event in the history of modern culture: a moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established social order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. His late works constitute a form of exile ... [They] remain unreconciled, uncoopted by a higher synthesis ... their irresolution and unsynthesised fragmentariness are constitutive, neither ornamental nor symbolic of something else. [They] are in fact about ‘lost totality’, and are therefore catastrophic.¹³

Of course, Said is here writing as much about Adorno (and himself) as about Beethoven: remorselessly alienated and exiled; his thought resistant to any kind of reconciliation; his work—and here Said is explicitly talking about Adorno—‘like a contrapuntal voice intertwined with fascism, bourgeois mass society, and communism, inexplicable without them, always critical and ironic about them.’¹⁴

How might we compare the exilic writing of Adorno and the Frankfurt School with Said’s? Morefield writes that Said ‘parts company with Adorno’ over the ‘exilic intellectual’s “special duty” to actively *resist* this world both intellectually and politically.’¹⁵ Said himself certainly did worry that Adorno injects Marxism with ‘a vaccine so powerful as to dissolve its agitational force

¹⁰ Said takes the phrase ‘late style’ from Theodor Adorno, ‘Late Style in Beethoven’ [1937] in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 564–567.

¹¹ Rose Rosengard Subotnik, ‘Adorno’s Diagnosis of Beethoven’s Late Style: Early Symptom of a Fatal Condition’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 29, no. 2 (1976): 242–275, at p. 270.

¹² Subotnik, ‘Adorno’s Diagnosis’.

¹³ Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 4–8.

¹⁴ Said, *On Late Style*, 14.

¹⁵ Morefield, *Unsettling the Word*, 146.

almost completely.¹⁶ But Said also writes that unlike many of his counterparts, Adorno never pretended to an apolitical neutrality. And—dare I say it—Said at times adopted an apolitical stance towards the university. In fact, Said called campus security to have anti-Vietnam student protestors ejected when they disrupted his class around the same time that Adorno called the police on his own student protestors. In 2000, meanwhile, Said claimed that ‘in 30 years of teaching, I’ve never taught a course on the Middle East. I don’t believe in politicizing the classroom.’ How should we understand what Said means here, especially in relation to his political theory?

Outside the classroom, Said was famous as a public intellectual and a Palestinian activist. But he also came from a left tradition—influenced strongly, for example, by post-Lukácsian writers—and I wonder if that tradition’s hostility to totality also influenced Said. His work, as *Unsettling the World* makes clear, resists the overly neat closures of analytic political theory. Perhaps this comes from his involvement in the messiness of real politics; perhaps it comes partly from the practice of literary criticism itself. But perhaps it can also be situated within a broader tradition of left-wing melancholia, intellectual exile, and catastrophe.

¹⁶ Said, *On Late Style*, 8.