

Introduction

Dedicated to the memory of Edward Said, scholar and humanist

1 November 1935 – 25 September 2003

It is only a few weeks since Edward Said was on British television introducing, with his friend Daniel Barenboim, the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, that Goethe-inspired symbol of hope in our time, about to give one of the Promenade Concerts in London's Royal Albert Hall. Two days ago a crowd of many thousands stood for a minute's silence in Trafalgar Square to remember him. They had gathered to protest against the situation in the Middle East, and against the illusion that war can solve problems and create the stability in which justice can flourish. Edward Said was a believer in bridges, the cultural bridges symbolised by the orchestra which he and Daniel Barenboim founded, of young Israeli, Palestinian and other Arab musicians making music together. He was also a person of huge moral authority, who never failed to speak out against hypocrisy and exploitation or to call for a compassionate and nuanced understanding of the human condition. He campaigned tirelessly for a more just world, particularly in the Middle East where he was born.

The bridge as trope, the theme of this issue, is clearly of very diverse application. It can suggest links across a spatial or temporal divide, between worlds or ideas, between mind and matter, between languages or cultures, between bodies, between, in fact, almost any two categories you care to mention. And of course the classic bridge between *two* diverse polarities is only one way of conceiving it. It may,

in “real” terms as in figurative terms, be between more than two points. The concept, the crux, is of a link between what would otherwise not be linked. Alterity—with its questions of the other, of difference, and perhaps Derridean *différance*—springs to mind. While interaction between points of difference implies a bridge of some kind, conversely the drawbridge idea is one of negation of the link, or of its possibility: of the choice of isolation. Individuals and cultures which feel themselves to be under threat sometimes try to pull up the drawbridge to protect themselves. But for now, balancing on the internet’s fragile bridge of electrical impulses, we communicate across spatial, cultural and temporal gulfs as never before.

Edward Said regarded the multiple perspectives of diasporic people such as himself as a bonus, a privilege. Many of the contributors to this edition are people who live between cultures and traditions, or between places, and in their work many link diverse elements. Clearly an edition such as this invites metaphoric readings of the links between cultures or cultural positions, either actual or potential, and indeed we have received a stimulating range of such submissions. What is included in this issue is distinguished because it engages with an open mind with topics often burdened with unoriginal, formulaic thinking. Particular attention has been paid to juxtapositions. Creative work is interleaved with essays, but both kinds are creative in their different ways. Readers are invited to consider the way the neighbouring pieces speak to each other and to other items in the issue across the ungraspable divides of cyberspace. A number of groupings may suggest themselves: for example, geographical (items to do with the Far East or the Middle East or the Caribbean, many positing links of a perhaps surprising kind with other places and cultures); intertextual (the way that new art can build on existing art); or physical (the body, both gendered and sexually oriented, as cultural construct and political agent). The complex dynamic

of individual and collective encounters between cultures is addressed, as are dilemmas to do with individualism and pluralism in maintaining a sense of identity, as well as profoundly political questions about the nature and use of iconography and language.

The first item is a poem by an American about an iconic image of a bridge from Japanese culture. It initiates a group of pieces presenting East/West bridges, which put the question of orientalism, in the specific sense Edward Said defined, again at the forefront of our minds. Thomas Fortenberry's "People Crossing an Arched Bridge" responds to a nineteenth-century print, a woodblock illustration of a poem by the ninth-century Japanese poet Ariwara no Narihira, using the aesthetic image of the scene with its bridge to reflect on less tangible links to other dimensions.

Japan is associated also with the next contribution, an essay by Antony Adolf, a Canadian resident, which posits a bold post-Bakhtinian argument about the nature of language and polyglossia. The piece draws on works by Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher who was in contact with Japanese scholars, in particular Count Kuki, who visited Germany in the 1920s and engaged with Heidegger in debates about language and aesthetics—a salutary reminder of the internationalism of German culture before the Third Reich. Taking polyglossic texts by Heidegger as his starting point, Adolf argues that while monolingualism sustains the illusion of linguistic stability, we should look to multilingualism to expose or highlight the instability of language—and also to overcome it. That the use of signifiers from different semiotic systems in one proposition or utterance brings language closer to stability and decidability, is a thesis of far-reaching implications.

The last of this triple group of items with an eye on the Far East but written by residents of North America is a story by a New Yorker of Korean and German descent. Heinz Insu Fenkl's story "The Song Bird" creates a new genesis for the Hans

Andersen story “The Nightingale.” It tells how a manuscript found by an American in Korea proves to be an eighteenth-century Korean narrative in the Chinese tradition, telling a story close to Andersen’s, though with significant differences. The moral fable he presents is one of evident political relevance to our time. Walter Benjamin’s famous essay springs to mind, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” published in 1936, and still prescient: “The destructiveness of war furnishes proof that society has not been mature enough to incorporate technology as its organ.” The “China” of the story is an imaginary location, in many ways already familiar to us, its origins embedded in the history of the cultures of other parts of the world as much as in those of China itself (a process Said’s concept of orientalism anatomises), and of course, in the story, seen from the subtle distance of a Korean perspective. The absolute power of the long-gone emperor is fabulous in every sense, yet not so remote from contemporary actualities as we might wish. That the story is dedicated to Charlotte Church means that it dovetails to our time, and to a modern vision not only of aesthetic beauty but of youthful innocence. The singer in the story is a figure of such innocence, but proves also to be one of great wisdom, and power of a different kind, as the story unfolds. The tale has the surface simplicity but resonant depth of the true folktale, which is here, as in Andersen, demonstrated to be as fresh and usable a language as ever. And if there is a reader who would like to translate the story into Korean, *EnterText* and the author would be glad to hear from you!

The mediation of cultural and moral positions happens not only through language or iconography, however, but through direct action. As our focus now turns from the Far East to the Middle East, Samar Habib’s essay engages with that focal point of world dynamics, the story of Israel / Palestine which unfolds day by day, tragically, in our news bulletins. One of Edward Said’s last contributions on the

subject “Dignity, Solidarity and the Penal Colony,” published in *The Politics of Anti-Semitism* edited by Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, is available online (see www.counterpunch.org and www.indybay.org). In that part of the world there seems no prospect of a bridge, though the metaphor of the road map has been deployed with not a little desperation in recent months. Rather the actuality is increasingly one which suggests the trope of the drawbridge, as the “great wall” icon, so anciently associated with China and so recently dissociated from Germany, is now indelibly replacing that of ancient olive groves in the land holy to so many of the world’s believers, as a new apartheid is implemented. All the more cheering therefore to read Samar Habib’s account of how Israeli gay activist groups have been campaigning in Israel for understanding of the Palestinian perspective.

This is followed by “Marwan’s David,” fiction which reads like a memoir. Frederick Zackel tells the story of an American lecturer introducing “western civilisation” to a group of students, one of whom, for reasons which the narrative reveals at its closure, creates his own challenging variant on the famously heroic representations of David in western art. The story invites the reader to think about the cultural assumptions behind what is conventionally dubbed the “great art” of the past, and in bridging the centuries through art’s diachronicity, returns us urgently to certain dilemmas of the present, both cultural and political.

Oblique perspectives on the British social landscape, as shaped by its links with the South Asia and the Middle East, are the topic of the next two items. Claire Tylee looks at the portrayal of Jewish assimilation to “Englishness” in Bernice Rubens’ critically neglected 1960s novel *Mate in Three*. The chess metaphor of the title proves to relate to an inset address to South African apartheid—when a whole society adopted the drawbridge mentality—and a fraught rhetoric of miscegenation.

In a wide-ranging essay which situates a detailed reading of the focal text in the context of contemporary politics, Jewish and African American writing and the *Woman's Novel*, she argues that the racial anxieties Rubens anatomises did not function in a vacuum but were bundled up with gender and class issues, with particularly pernicious effects on the lives of the women portrayed. It is a reminder that one of the complex issues of critical theory today is the extent to which useful parallels can be drawn between differing historical, social and cultural contexts. As Tylee points out, Sartre in his introduction to Fanon four decades ago posited a similarity between the predicaments of Jews and black people, and as understanding of the culture of white dominance and the role of performed identities grows, such cross-cultural applications of ideas seem to be growing productively too, not least in the use of feminist theory in the postcolonial field, and vice versa. Those who have experienced marginalisation of one kind, it seems, may be quick to respond to the different marginalisation of others, as Samar Habib's essay suggests.

Racial anxieties are sensitively tackled in the next piece too. Just as Heinz Insu Fenkel has re-envisioned a Hans Christian Andersen story, so the traditional folktale of Goldilocks is given a radical new twist in Cathy McSporran's compelling story. Set in a present-day Scottish city, though it could have been in any British conurbation, it tells, from his own angle, of a burglar's raid on a well-kept family home, one which signals exploitable cultural difference to this culturally blinkered intruder, who in the end gets more than he bargained for. The story turns neatly on its head, too, the pernicious national rhetoric, nurtured by the tabloid press, of the "immigrant" or now increasingly the "asylum-seeker" as the archetypal intruder-figure in the national landscape.

The reading and misreading of cultural and gender signifiers by outsiders is the starting point of the next item, as we revisit the Middle East. Fashion among young Muslim women in Egypt today, exercising choices between western and eastern styles, is Isobel Ryan's topic. Her analysis of the semiology and aesthetics of clothing and other aspects of fashion challenges some of the glib assumptions about women and Islam often made from a western perspective. She concludes paradoxically that the veil, in its different manifestations, can be a more liberating choice for women than its alternatives. The essay also includes a brief overview of historic feminist reformers of Egyptian social mores. In a sort of parallel piece to Ryan's, Sumana R. Ghosh gives an analysis of the cultural presentation of the female body in India (*EnterText's* first contribution from the subcontinent), in which she argues that the body in being operated on as raw material for culture is inevitably othered. Unlike Ryan's, however, it is less about modern fashion than about tradition. Interestingly both papers refer to the prevalent use among the groups they discuss of the cosmetic cream Fair and Lovely, a reminder not only of global capitalism but of the underlying racism evident in the cultural privileging, in so many societies, of a lighter skin.

If the image of a bridge implies some sort of solid link to sustain transit, the overarching trope of Cyril Dabydeen's story uses a much less secure setting, the water itself. It deploys the figure of a swimmer in a municipal swimming bath, whose idiosyncratic stroke is emblematic of his marginalised identity as a tropical South American in cold Canada. This maps onto the story of Dabydeen himself, a Guyana-born Canadian resident, but the story could be about any similar migrant. It is a powerful parable about assimilation as threat, as it engages with the pressures to conform—to perform according to mainstream convention. Yet here there is no

drawbridge to raise in self-protection: the swimmer flounders in the water under the gaze of hostile lifeguards, left with only one paradoxical choice for true self-preservation—the underwater quest for aqueous “roots” in the myth of Atlantis, a dream and a memory which, it implies, can only be recovered by a suicidal plunge to the depths. Dabydeen’s creation of a distinctive idiom for the English of the narrator-swimmer embeds the sense of his distinctness, his alienation, and his desperation, right at the heart of this haunting story.

The Caribbean theme is developed in the two essays on literature which follow. Vivian Halloran concentrates on parallel scenes in recent works of international Caribbean literature, small moments in their different contexts, but resonant ones. She selects from the latest publications of Caryl Phillips and V. S. Naipaul, a travel memoir and a novel respectively, the encounter of the narrators with child-prostitutes, and in a searching examination of each narrative’s self-positioning in relation to this encounter finds troublingly that both accounts risk valorising a re-enactment of colonial violence by seeing the protagonist’s return to a symbolic “mother country” in terms of sexual conquest. Also with an eye on gender issues, Maria Cristina Fumagalli focuses on Marlene Nourbese Philip, drawing interesting parallels with Ovidian metamorphoses, and referring to the distinctive ideas about cross-culturality of the Guyanese writer and thinker, Wilson Harris. The title of Philip’s *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* is, we learn, a quotation from Dryden’s translation of Ovid’s story of Io. The nymph was transformed to a heifer by Zeus so that she could not accuse him of rape, but later restored to human form and to language. Philip has acknowledged the influence of Ovid, and as Fumagalli shows, there are illuminating similarities between the cruelties and redemptive strategies mapped in the ancient texts and those of slavery and its legacies

in injustice and exploitation today. Philip's undoing of convention in her approach to language is expressed through linguistic and typographic innovation (as illustrated here), in the name of an assertion of the feminine in the teeth of masculine tradition. Ultimately her address to memory and re-membering via Ovid enables this African Caribbean writer, Fumagalli argues, to build a bridge to an ancestral memory of Africa, since it was African spiritual tradition which fed that of ancient Greece. Thus what is held out is the promise of collapsing the gulfs of time and space and the divisions and losses due to cultural dislocation: an interesting parallel to Dabydeen's theme. It is particularly pleasing that this essay alludes to the trope of the bridge in the distinctive guise familiar to readers of Wilson Harris. For him, the only resource capable of bridging what he calls the architecture of space is the imagination.

Finally, Sarawut Chutiwongpeti's contribution forms a welcome addition to our publications in the visual arts field, and brings us back to Asia with our first contribution from Thailand. Images of his installation project, a series of vibrantly colourful spaces created over the last seven years using architecture, light and sound, are here reverting to their initial condition as digital works, as they were developed on computer before being given three-dimensional form. In their address to the concept of living space arcing over time and place, and as a luminous expression of their creator's concern for cross-cultural encounters, these images make a fitting conclusion to our issue on bridges and drawbridges. Light is, after all, a bridge between all living creatures on the planet, as well as being one of the great cross-cultural symbols shared by all human cultures.

The roller-coaster ride around the world which this issue encompasses presents great variations and contrasts as well as some surprisingly similar curves. In the end, it is the readers' interest in perceiving links—building bridges—for

themselves which matters. It is perhaps significant that one of the works played by the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra in London on 22 August was Schubert's Eighth Symphony, the Unfinished. Contemporary events, dominated as they so often are by drawbridge attitudes rather than openness and a will to reach across to the other—to bridge gulfs—are always radically unfinished, even though individual contributions have to come to an end. Edward Said will be greatly missed, but he will also be greatly remembered.

Paula Burnett, Editor

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