

## Interview with Edward W. Said

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The following interview with the late Professor Edward W. Said was conducted in Dublin, Ireland on the 24<sup>th</sup> June, 1999. Said was interviewed by Professor Kevin Whelan, Director of the Keough-Naughton Centre for Irish Studies, University of Notre Dame, and Andy Pollak, Director of the Centre for Cross-Border Studies in Armagh in Ireland. The interview spans a range of political, cultural and intellectual issues, traversing the ongoing conflict in the Middle East between Israel and the Palestinian people; Said's role in the intellectual and political mediation of this conflagration, together with his troubled relationship with the late Yasser Arafat and, briefly, his engagement in the debates surrounding Ireland's postcolonial history. Said also traces his own literary-critical heritage, one that is, perhaps, well-established in contemporary postcolonial studies—figures such as Auerbach, Vico and Conrad of course are to the forefront. There is also a poignant section of the interview in which Said speaks about the fatal breed of leukaemia that was to eventually kill him in the autumn of 2003. Finally, and topically, Said turns to his relationship with Irish literary and colonial history. He singles out the work of The Field Day Theatre Company, a movement that represents the vanguard of postcolonial studies in Ireland. Chiefly guided at an intellectual level by Seamus Deane, the company has reached across theatrical production, pamphleteering, anthologizing and the production of literary-critical and historiographical monographs over its career since its foundation in 1980 by the actor Stephen Rea and the playwright Brian Friel. Said cites this cultural initiative as a series of inspirational postcolonial events and asserts that such a movement is to be cherished as it is an undertaking with international importance. (This interview was published in part in *The Irish Times* on 3rd July 1999, and we gratefully acknowledge the permission of the authors to re-print this version of the interview).

KW: What is your linguistic heritage?

ES: I was always between languages. I have Arabic, English, French, and I can speak and certainly read Italian, German and Spanish. I have never

really known which is my first language, whether it is Arabic or English. It is strange, and I do not feel completely at home in either. I can certainly sit here and chat with you in English, but I am aware that there is another side of my brain where I am translating it to Arabic. The same occurs when I am speaking Arabic. I just came from an Arab country, where all my dealings were in Arabic. There I am conscious of my English side. It is very strange, which is why, early on, I got interested in Conrad, because he had the same feeling. The Irish writers have that same sensibility. That's why I think one of Terry Eagleton's most interesting books was one of his early books, called *Exiles and Emigrés*.

KW: There is that certain degree of linguistic estrangement.

ES: Right. But in our case, adding to the complication, there is a classical language in Arabic, which has a certain sanctity, because it is the language of God. The Koran, as revealed to Mohammed, is the unmediated word of God. It is not mediated; it is God. Alongside this classical language, there is a modern written language, which is also the lingua franca, adapted from the high classical. Then there is the modern standard and all the newspapers are in that language. Then there are all of the vernaculars, which are completely different from each other, and different from the written language.

KW: Are they mutually intelligible?

ES: No. If I go to Algeria, it is a different Arabic from Egyptian Arabic or Palestinian Arabic. In Iraq, I cannot understand a word they say. So, amongst educated people, we speak newspaper Arabic; it is a form of classical; plus there is the other classical, and then all the demotics.

KW: No wonder you became a literary critic.

ES: Either that, or you become schizophrenic. It is really quite extraordinary. I know three or four dialects, because Egyptian is quite distinct, and Palestinian is quite distinct, and Lebanese is also quite distinct, and I can move between the three of them rather comfortably. Especially Egyptian, because I love it—it is the most interesting and elegant spoken language.

KW: Is Cairo your favourite city?

ES: Certainly more than Jerusalem. My father also disliked Jerusalem—an austere, basically religious city. I have pleasant memories of it because I was born in Jerusalem where our house was. It is still there, in west, or Israeli Jerusalem. That was basically all Arab before 1948: we were driven out of it. When I went first went back in '92, I was expecting to find an

Israeli family living there, but I found an international Christian embassy, which is a fundamentalist Christian organisation, which is also Zionist. Now you won't believe the next part: they believe (and the reason they support Israel) is that all Jewish people, from all over the world, will be gathered there for the second coming, in order for them to be killed.

KW: Killed?

ES: Either they convert, or if they don't convert, they are destroyed.

KW: And this is organised out of your ancestral family home?

ES: It is extraordinary—the mixture is just too much. And those f\*\*kers are in my house. I have never been able to go in there, although it is an office. It is a beautiful house, a two-story stone villa. The first time we went there, my daughter said, "Daddy, don't you want to go in?" Some woman came out. She saw us standing there taking pictures, and I was pointing out trees in the garden that are still there where I used to play with my cousins and my sister. She said "Daddy, don't you want to go in," and an American woman came out and immediately said, "What can I do for you? Would you like to come in and have a chat?" I could not make myself go in. I just pointed out the window of the room where I was born. I was delivered by midwife at home.

AP: How do you describe yourself in religious terms? What are your religious beliefs, if any? You would be a secular humanist?

ES: Or an agnostic, something pretty vague.

KW: How quickly did you lose religion or gain secularism?

ES: Age 14. Something like that. I was very influenced in my college years of study by Newman. He was my favourite writer. I just enjoyed the whole elegance of the description in the *Apologia* and even more the grammar and the prose, and the apparent logic. I lost a religious sensibility the moment I started to look at the world, and especially my part of the world, where the source of most of our problems is religious. I grew up in a country where the natural product of the country is religion. That is what we make. You make Guinness; we make monotheism.

AP: What are the sources of your recent discontent?

ES: I am not really pessimistic. I am pessimistic in the short run, I am certainly very critical, and I often feel the way Swift felt about Ireland—that it is quite hopeless and one would have wished we could do more. We have certainly suffered a great deal from the most disastrously poor

leadership historically. We have always had leaders who make the wrong decisions; worst yet, in the modern era, our leaders, including Arafat, have never learnt from the past. They keep making the same mistakes over and over again.

KW: Do you think that the Palestinian cause lacks sufficient intellectual underpinning?

ES: Amongst all the Arabs, many sociological studies show that we have the highest rate, not only of literacy, but of university graduates. The Palestinian diaspora, the four and a half million who live abroad now, are by far the most successful Arab group in the world. By far. We have more millionaires, more brilliant scientists, doctors, lawyers, bankers, economists. Where we go wrong is that we were never raised to participate in politics. We (the educated middle class I come from) were always trained to suppose that politics was left to other people. That is why the notion of citizenship is very important. Politics was always thought of as corrupting, something to be left in the hands of clan leaders, rather than something that you could work your way into. Not only is Arafat perpetuating that, but he is dependent on exploiting it. He himself is a perfect example. He comes into the West Bank and Gaza, in '94, and instead of trying to use the structure of politics that was created during the insurrection, during the intifada, he destroys what was a really revolutionary and socially extremely advanced structure, decentralised, involving women, all classes of society, everybody participating. What does he do? He breaks it up and re-establishes the clan tribal structure based on patronage. I can give you one concrete example. There were two very powerful leaders of the insurrection in Nablus, which is one of the big cities in Palestine. They refused to kow-tow to him, so he had them summoned, and he said, "What is it you people need? Why do you not join my authority?" So they said, "We have a new idea, we don't want to be just another Arab state with lots of police and all that." Well, the long and the short of it is that he gave one of them a gas station, and the other he made director general of some ministry, and that was the end of that. Arafat's aim is quite simple: to save himself, to keep himself a maximum leader. I have actually seen this from the days when he was in Beirut when I was very close to him. Let us say you were an employee in what they now call a ministry, and you want to get married, and you need two weeks off; he gives you permission, personally. He spends all his time with little bits of paper that people bring to him, and he signs or he refuses their petitions personally. He is the source not only of authority, but most important, he controls the budget. That is the source of his power.

AP: I was told an extraordinary story about the sum of money that was given by donors. He took all but \$500,000.

ES: Yes, the whole amount. And that is what the constant struggle between him and the donors is, to control the budget and to dispense it systematically, and there is no mechanism for doing that; everything has to come through him. In effect he controls the monopoly on cement, he controls the monopoly on cigarettes, he controls the most important of all, the monopoly on fuel. He made a deal with the Israelis, so that an excise tax is paid by every Palestinian on every litre of fuel in the whole occupied territories. He gets five percent of that, deposited directly into an Israeli bank. His number one aim is to survive and remain in power, and number two, I don't think he has anything further, because in my opinion he is a prisoner of his accord. His room for movement is very small.

KW: When you were working with him, had you those reservations?

ES: I did. But don't forget, we were exiles. We were in the middle of one war after another. During 1982, the Israelis were constantly attacking Beirut. Most important of all, I saw my role as being somebody who spoke of Palestine in the west. I had very little to do with what was going on there. I saw some of it in a country like Lebanon, which was going through civil war, which is immensely corrupting to society. That was the way things were. I have never said this before, but I must say I was completely fooled by one thing. I never thought Arafat would sell out to the extent he did. He gave up every thing.

KW: He became a King Abdullah.

ES: Absolutely. No question about it. He gave us up to be king, in return for which they wanted him to sign the papers. He was the only leader who could deliver the Palestinians. And notice, that all of his closest comrades, the people who might have supplied some opposition to him, were assassinated in the last three or four years before Oslo. It is quite significant. He is the Israeli enforcer. He is the Petain of the Palestinians, in terms of the regime he has established inside the occupied territories, that small area of Palestine, which he runs without sovereignty. He has to get permission from the Israelis to go in and out; he cannot even go from Gaza to Ramallah without their permission.

AP: And what percentage is it from Ramallah to Palestine?

ES: It is divided into areas A, B and C. A right now is a little less than 4%. B, which is jointly-controlled, but is Israeli security, is about 20%.

AP: That's the West Bank?

ES: We are talking about Gaza and the West Bank, but mainly the West Bank. And then there is area C which is Israeli, which is the rest: figure it

out. The Israelis control about 80% or actually more because in area B, which is jointly-controlled, they control access to the embassies and they are responsible for security. So they control 96%. His regime is like a Duvalier, a Papa Doc.

KW: Are you also suggesting that he was complicit in those assassinations?

ES: No, I have no information at all about that. I think he is a tragic figure. Certainly he accomplished a great deal before '93. He and his organisation, the PLO, accomplished something terribly important. We had been a forgotten people by virtue of our dispersal. We had no identity, properly speaking. We had been submerged in other Arab countries. Under his leadership, the PLO unified the Palestinian people by giving everyone a point of reference, a national authority. That is his accomplishment. But his accomplishment is quite ironic, as he is presiding over its dissolution. Now most Palestinians outside of Palestine, who are for the first time in our history the majority (there are more people outside than there are inside) do not think he represents them anymore. Of course he knows that. He reads every article I write, and he knows that I represent lots of people, inside and outside. I am his major critic with any credibility as I am not in the pay of an Arab government. I do not work for the Syrians or the Egyptians or anyone like that. I refuse to go to countries like Syria, because they would make use of me and I would be seen as supporting them, given that it is a dictatorship, if I went there as their guest. I would lose my credibility, so I just do not go. I take money from no one. I live totally independent. As a result, I have acquired a huge constituency all over the Arab world, and I have been writing for the Arab press for the first time in my life over the last five or six years, since '93. I write twice a month, and my articles are published all over the Arab world. Even in the countries where I am banned people read me because of faxes and xeroxes. What will lead to some trouble is the death of Arafat. There is no clear successor to him. He has been very careful about that. The people who surround him are mediocrities basically, and there is an incipient struggle between his political heirs, and the security forces that effectively run things. He has heads of security forces; he has about 14 or 15 different security apparatuses, and two or three of the heads of those are very powerful because they control armed men. They also collaborate with the Israelis for security reasons, and the CIA. The CIA plays a very important role in our current situation, accorded it by Arafat. On the one hand he has these security people, and then he has his political people on the other hand. Now according to the constitution one or two of these political people will succeed him; they will come up against the fact that they have no following and that they are known as corrupt. They will also come up against the security people. This will happen in the next two or three years, because he is very ill.

AP: The great mistake of Arafat and his leadership was to accept the idea of partition.

ES: I blame myself as well; we all accepted the idea of partition—that there should be two states in Palestine, that we should accept what the Israelis give us because they occupied the whole of it in '67. Prior to that, at least until the early '70s, our goal was very much like the South African one. We wanted a single secular democratic state for Arabs and Jews where all would be citizens. Then we accepted the notion of partition, we went back to the partition of 1947, and we said we would accept a separate state...

KW: A betrayal.

ES: At the time I was for it too, because I saw no other way.

AP: Do you see another way now?

ES: I wish I had a map with me now. Look, physically, on the ground, there is no way that we can have a Palestinian state that means anything even geographically. Do not forget that there are 144 settlements, including twenty or so settlements in the heart of Gaza where they control all the best land, so Gaza is divided in the middle. There is no way of getting from Gaza to the West Bank because Israel is in between them. Now Barak has said he is going to build a thirty mile causeway connecting the West Bank to Gaza.<sup>1</sup> How many years is that going to take? That is number one. Number two is all those settlements are connected in the West Bank by what they call by-passing roads that go around the Arab concentration. All of them. We have no continuous territory. They are all Israeli roads controlled by the Israelis—most of them built by the military since Oslo. They are for the settlers, so that the settlers can go from one area to another. South Africa operated on the same principle. So what kind of state would it be if you do not have contiguity? The Israelis will give back only 40%—that's the dream, that Barak will "give" 40% back. They will still control the Jordan valley. They will control Jerusalem and its environs. Jerusalem is like a megalopolis occupying 25% of the West Bank. All of this has happened since '67. They have continued adding to Jerusalem. You read about it in the paper everyday. They are building new settlements in Jerusalem; they just keep expanding the city limits, and building new settlements on Arab land.

KW: You must get infuriated by the UN all the time?

ES: The UN is controlled by the great powers and their veto. The United States has vetoed over 65 resolutions in the Security Council, concerning the violating of the fourth Geneva Convention, expropriating land,

destroying houses, contravening international law, torture, etc. etc. Every time one of these resolutions comes up, the United States just vetoes it.

KW: You were talking about the brute realities of the situation but yet you retain your faith in the concept of citizenship. How would you see citizenship and democracy as a practical alternative?

ES: Only through local struggles which have to begin in groups of communities coming up against legal situations which are unacceptable. About 20% of the Israeli population is secular—that is a million people, and they are openly treated as second class citizens, as blacks were in South Africa, because they are non-Jews. These have spawned a new educated generation, well aware of the ironies and contradictions of apartheid. Many of them have gone to Israeli universities and they feel as if they are Israeli too, so they want the same rights as Jews do. It is a civil rights movement which is led by some very brilliant people, including Azmi Bishara.<sup>2</sup> He is a very good friend of mine. We work together. He is a member of the Knesset, totally fluent in both Hebrew and Arabic. Because of his skill, he is a great orator, and he is very courageous. He will go to a place where the Israelis inside Israel are trying to take Arab land and he will stand there and let the Israeli army come and bully him around. He was shot in the shoulder yesterday by a soldier while he was trying to stop expropriation inside Israel. They are still taking land from Arab villages inside Israel. Arab villages have no legal claims; they are merely tolerated, because the land of Israel belongs to the Jewish people. These are anomalies that exist nowhere [else] in the world. It is quite extraordinary. It is a theocracy. And what does it mean to the Jewish people? It means a Jew in New York has more rights than I do, because he is a Jew; even though I was born there, I can never return, and he can immediately go and attain citizenship from Israel. The law of return is really the core to the whole thing. Any Jew can become a citizen. So Bishara is leading a battle to develop the idea of citizenship for all people, not what they call an ethnocracy within the Israeli system. Now, I am trying and others like me, to extend that also to the Palestinian areas under Arafat. It is very important to note, in the area administered by the Palestinian authority under Oslo, we have had an elected legislative assembly since 1996. That legislative assembly, for the last three years, has put on Arafat's desk a basic law, or a constitution. He has refused to sign it. We do not even have the rule of law; it is the law of power. Arafat just does what he wants. So they can pick you up and throw you in jail, often with the encouragement of the United States, under the guise of "fighting terrorism." Al Gore went to Palestine in 1996 and suggested to Arafat that he establish a thing called a state security court where they hold secret trials with no lawyers, no juries, no witnesses. If you are accused of a security offence and you are a part of the Islamic movement, they can throw you in jail, torture you, and in some cases kill you. That

has been going on. I am part of an organisation called the Independent Commission for Citizens Rights, and we are the major reporting authority on the security and civil rights situation inside the Palestinian territory. The first year we were established we got fifty or sixty complaints. Last year we got 4000 complaints about security violations. There is no rule of law. But there are international conventions on torture, rules of freedom of speech etc. etc., and when we declared independence in Algiers in 1988, I was a member of the national council when we declared a state. In our declaration of independence, certain principles—non-discrimination between the sexes, freedom of speech, freedom of association, all of that—were ratified, so there is an embryonic platform, which Arafat refuses now even to acknowledge, so that pressure is building up inside Palestine.

AP: What about the Israeli citizens?

ES: Now, it is fairly small, because most Israelis still want a separate state. They do not want us there basically. Israeli society is obviously internally divided. There is the extreme right wing religious group and the extreme right wing separatist movement which think that all the territory, including the Palestinian areas, are really Israeli. I had a confrontation with a soldier last year when I was making a film for the BBC. We were driving along, and I saw bulldozers, so I stopped, and they were actually taking land away from three Arab villagers in Palestinian territory. I got down and I asked the man what happened; he said, "He is taking our land, he is destroying it," to expand the road, one of those settlement roads. There were about twenty soldiers with the bulldozers, all of them armed. I went up to the leader and said, "Listen, I would like to talk to you. How dare you do this? This is his land. These people have been farming this land for hundreds of years. You are destroying it." And he said, "Well, it's progress." I recorded all of this. The officer in charge refused to talk about it. And he said "We build rockets to the moon, we build cars, now we are building roads, this is progress." I said, "But you can't take somebody's land away." "It's not his land." Literally, he said, "it's not his land." So I say, "Whose land is it?" He said, "It's the land of the state of Israel, because all of this land belongs to us." They go back to the Old Testament. It is the land of the Jewish people. It is a very twisted idea of what Palestine is: only the Jews have a proper title to it. If you look at the history of the place, they play a very small role in it. Historically they had sovereignty in Palestine for about 200 years, during the time of David and Solomon and their successors, roughly around the time of the first century. When Jesus was born, it was a Roman province. It was a short-lived thing, about 200 years. That is when they had sovereignty. That does not mean that they were not there; they were there. The bible is full of this conquest, but there were other people there who are also a part of that history, and who is to say that many of us Palestinians do not have some Israelite

blood in us too? The history of Palestine, if you look at it carefully, is a pluralist system of which the longest single tenure has been the Arab. It is incomparably the longest. The Arabs conquered the Israelites in the eighth century, and they have been there ever since. The Byzantines were there too, but the population remained largely Arab.

KW: Last night you were talking about the tragic but necessary intertwining of the two cultures—that the Palestinians cannot live now without the Israelis.

ES: The Arab world has about 250-300 million people, and the number of Jews in Israel is 5 million, so for most Arabs, Palestine is an Arab country. It is part of the Arab world, no question; as many Israelis know in the end, they have to accommodate themselves to the majority. The problem with Israel, as your great Irish writer, Conor Cruise O'Brien put it, is that "they are in a state of siege." My line would be, for how long? You cannot live in a state of siege against the entire Arab world for years and years and years. It is only possible if they are sustained by the United States. How long are they going to be sustained by the United States?

KW: You cannot do it without damaging yourself, because you internalise it.

ES: I think that is what has happened. It has produced these extremists, but it has also produced a small but significant number of people who are beginning to awaken to the realities. They realise that we cannot go on like this; how long are we going to be a garrison? We cannot remain a pariah of the Middle East. We have the greatest air force, we are a nuclear power, we are a chemical power, a biological power, but how long can we do that? What does it mean to use an atomic bomb in the Middle East? Israel is so tiny. . . How long can they go on living with an underclass of Palestinians who are the coolies? That is also terribly important. Secular Israelis are beginning to argue that we cannot live as a theocracy; we cannot always be dominated by these religious people. I will give you an example. Last January, I had a talk with Zubin Mehta, who is the conductor of the Israeli Philharmonic, a wonderful orchestra. Within the orchestra, they are having problems with the minister of culture, one of those extreme religious bigots who believe that men and woman cannot sit together in the orchestra. That kind of problem is awakening them. And certain streets on Saturday are closed because they say that cars should not go through here. So there is a beginning of a secular response, even though Israel does not have a constitution or a bill of rights. And then there are the critical intellectuals, historians, anthropologists, etc., who are going over the history of Israel, and re-examining the official narrative, which says that we came here when it was empty and liberated it from the British etc. They are looking at the awkward facts in their own archives.

KW: Is that something that is important to you?

ES: Oh, tremendously, because they have made great inroads in the national consciousness, and they represent a force for change. Many of them are academics. They call themselves post-Zionists and they are trying to create bridges between themselves and Arab intellectuals such as myself. They are the people who invited me to speak to the Israeli law program.

KW: How does your literary career intersect with politics? Some people would recognise you as a Palestinian intellectual and activist but many more would see you as the progenitor of post-colonialism and Orientalism.

ES: They feed into each other. I have always been interested in exile, exiled writers, and writers out of place. That is why Swift is so interesting for me, and Conrad. The great figures that I have been closely associated with are like Auerbach in Istanbul. The figures who are most interesting to me, I am convinced, would be deeply hostile to me, for ethnocentric reasons. Not only because they were Jewish, but because they were Europeans. I do not think we would get along, but I was interested mostly for that reason, that we shared things in common but spiritually we would be in different worlds, because most of them were very conservative. Conrad was a reactionary politically. I am an intellectual who is always trying to create bridges and break borders and barriers, and talk to the other. I find that is the most important thing: to use my anomalous position as a way of exploring. And look at the books I have written, aside from the obviously political ones. *Beginnings* is about finding a new way; how do you start? Its theory is that you have to make up your own start; it is not something given to you, and there is a certain amount of fiction in it. Vico is very important to me, as he is to Joyce, and Beckett and so on. And my literary criticism is all about movement, like travelling theory, how things go from one place to the next. I have never been very interested in the establishment, except as something to be overcome or to be penetrated. I am interested in how things change, from almost a nomadic position. But I am also committed to universal values at the same time. If my people are entitled to justice, then all people are entitled to justice. Literary work has to do with the demystification of the rhetoric of false humanism. If you are a humanist, how can you say that there are universal rights, but only for white people, and not for coloured people, or the lesser people, that they are only for Jews, and not for Arabs, only for Catholics and not for Protestants, and vice versa. I have always been interested in those kinds of inequities, and also the duplicitous use of language. I try always to generate a language that is transparent. I am always against jargon.

KW: Is it true that you have been trying to clarify your presentation, to more and more use a language that is entirely accessible to many audiences?

ES: It is very difficult, I have to tell you. You are always on the edge. I have been teaching for forty years. Even today, when I go in to teach a class that I have been teaching for twenty years, I feel profoundly nervous. I always feel that I am on the edge of unintelligibility or inaccuracy, so it is a very precarious sense that I have. But I think it is terribly important for the system not just to fall into routine, repeating the same catch phrases. I want to communicate with clarity on as many levels as possible, to as many different audiences as possible. I just came from Egypt where I gave a talk; I talked to the press, and I talked to everyone. I do not ever want to be accused of saying one thing to my people, and a totally different thing to others. I am trying to say the same thing everywhere.

KW: Would you say that there is a failure of communication in the modern university system?

ES: Totally, totally. It has become the preserve of jargon-ridden specialists. That is also my critique of the foreign policy establishment in the United States. It is based on the notion that you can only speak about it if you are an accredited foreign policy expert. Chomsky and I are the two main people who are challenging that. He is a linguist and I am a literary critic. And when people say “You don’t have a political science degree,” that is the position I want to attack. I have been accused in respectable journals of being a professor of terror. A long, ten-page article entitled “The Professor of Terror” appeared in a commentary magazine, a leading American Jewish monthly, claiming that I am this, that and the other thing. I also faced physical threats; they burned my office in 1985 at the university. Both my family and I have been subject to various threats and obviously, I have been kept out of things, because they are against my politics.

KW: But is that sense of tension when you teach important?

ES: That is where I want to be. It is also partly a form of resistance against my illness. I have been ill with a very rare and incurable form of leukaemia, and I have partly written my memoir as a form of resistance against that because it was completely unrelated to the world I am living in now and I wanted to go back to my early years and recover an irrecoverable world—Palestine before 1948, Egypt before the revolution and Lebanon before the civil war. During that time I was very ill; I was going through terrible treatment; none of it worked. I had four and a half years of chemotherapy and radiation. I was diagnosed in 1991, but I started treatment in 1994, and I went right through till the middle of 1998.

Then it was revealed to me that no conventional chemotherapy could work on my disease. It was called refractory leukaemia. Last summer, I went through horrendous treatment; it gives me a shudder thinking about it. My doctors told me I was on the edge of the end, but the only thing available to me was an experimental treatment, called the monochromal anti-body. It was extremely rigorous; it took twelve weeks. I began on June the first, and finished at the end of August, and they were the worst twelve weeks of my life. But I was able to work on my memoirs at the same time, and that is when I finished them, in the course of that treatment, although I went through hell. I had the most terrible side effects you can imagine, including nausea, high-temperature, and worst of all, shaking. I used to get what are called shaking chills. Writing the memoir was a daily rendezvous that would anchor me to my life, and digging it out of my physical body—it was very hard to do, because I write long-hand—was a tremendous challenge.

AP: What about your Irish interests?

ES: I have to tell you something very important. All this stuff about the Irish being so grateful that I have come to Ireland, I just cannot understand it because for me, I am so grateful to Ireland, especially for its literary and cultural example. You have had many more years of imperialism than we have had, and you have produced a fabulous culture of resistance and an extraordinary spirit, which I desperately hope we can measure up to by about 10%. We are the ones who are grateful to you. One of the things that I always do when I lecture in the Arab world is to talk about the Irish struggle along with the South African struggle. There are three places that have meant a great deal to me; one is South Africa, another is Ireland, and the third is India. These places have meant a great deal to me culturally, not just because there was always a spirit of resistance, but because out of it, there is this huge cultural effort which I think is much more important than arms, and armed struggle. That is why I have always been a critic of the Palestinian notion of armed struggle as the be all and end all.

KW: What do you particularly value of Irish literature?

ES: The longevity of resistance, even before Swift, even from the beginning. When I first became aware of its powerful undercurrent in high British culture, starting with Spenser, the horrendous bloodthirsty hatred and contempt for the Irish, my immediate reaction was that I was aghast, but I also found the resistance there. It began for me with Swift, because he is really the first writer I encountered. And then people like John Mitchel with his prison diary and James Connolly. There is something quite important in all that. And then of course the Irish renaissance. Yeats, Wilde, Shaw, all these people were my mother's milk to me. But then I discovered their connection with the struggle. One of the books I read for

the first time, during the Oslo period, was *Peace by Ordeal*, that famous book on the Irish peace treaty and negotiation, by Lord Longford. I asked my friend Tom Flanagan, the historical novelist, where does one find out about what happened between the Irish and the British. He said that the best book on the subject is easily available. Flanagan is a good friend of mine. It is through him that I met Heaney in the middle '70s out in California. I started reading Field Day, and came to Ireland and met Seamus Deane in the middle '80s as well. I was invited by the Yeats Summer School.

AP: And what do you think of Field Day's contribution?

ES: Oh, it is enormous; Irish people do not sufficiently recognise it. I see Field Day as a revisionist literary movement of the highest order. I associate it with similar groups in the Arab world, in India, subaltern studies, in the United States, the revisionist historians, and so on and so forth. Field Day's distinction is that they are also these great writers. No other group has anything like that collection of distinguished poets, playwrights, actors . . . There is no one like Brian Friel, nobody like Seamus Deane, Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin. Field Day is principally literary. Most of the other movements involve historical scholars, but these people are a combination of scholarship and creativity that is unparalleled in the world today. Their literary distinction is quite unique, but it is also revisionist literary.

KW: And you think that it is undervalued in Ireland?

ES: I think it is undervalued all over the world, because most people have just not heard of Field Day. They have heard of Seamus Heaney; they may have heard of Brian Friel; they may have heard, or seen, Stephen Rea. They may read Tom Paulin, or see him on the Late Show, but they do not understand that all of them come out of a particular historical, and above all, cultural moment, which is based upon re-imagining or re-inventing Ireland, to quote a phrase of Declan Kiberd, whose book I actually published in my series.

KW: You would see Field Day as something of global significance?

ES: Absolutely, no question about it. Global on a very high level. I do not know any other movement like it. I wish we had such a group. We do not. We have individual writers in the Arab world who try to do the same thing. They re-read the history of the Arabs and Islam, individually, but they are not part of a group working together producing plays, books, etc.

KW: Is that why you wanted Seamus Deane to give the keynote at the Columbia conference in your honour?

ES: They asked me, and I said this work is the kind of thing that I would like to aspire to, to be part of a group like that.

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<sup>1</sup> Said is referring to the newly elected, at the time of the interview, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak.

<sup>2</sup> Azmi Bishara is a Palestinian Christian who led the Balad Party in the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament from 1996 to 2007, when he resigned on foot of 'unspecified' criminal charges being laid against him by the Israeli security forces.