

Louis Armand, PhD
SUPERVISOR'S REPORT

MA dissertation:
"EDWARD W. SAID: POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES AND THE POLITICS OF
LITERARY THEORY,"
by Bibiana Machátová, September, 2007

Ms Machátová's MA dissertation attempts the unenviable yet necessary task of inquiring into the relative neglect of postcolonial theory in the Czech Republic and in particular the reception of the work of Edward Said. While literary studies have dutifully embraced the trends of British and, to some extent American, fiction between 1980 and the beginning of the 1990s, little of the very substantial theoretical work of that period has found its way into the localised critical discourse. This could be said of the work of critics like Vincent Cheng and Derek Attridge, although Irish nationalist critics like Declan Kiberd have been more than adequately engaged in the distinct discipline of Irish Studies, while in American studies New Historicism has served in this role to some degree.

This is in fact rather surprising considering the almost recent political events in the Czech Republic, and the series of post-colonialisms that may be said to characterise Czech history after WWI. However, this is not the focus of Ms Machátová's dissertation, although the political and biographical dimension of Said's work as a public intellectual is, and one may be inclined to ask about whether or not the reception of Said has—here as elsewhere—been critically conditioned, or ethnically and geo-politically. Certainly these issues continue to feature in the discourse surrounding Said's legacy in the United States, with its almost schizophrenic preoccupation with manifest destiny and the alienation and affirmation of the "self" in the figure of the other. A trite and too easily foisted schematic that, at least since Fanon, has been one of the core critical objects of anti-colonialist and "Post-Colonialist" thinking. As Ms Machátová points out, it is inevitable that the discourse of ideas be bound up with the pragmatics of ethnicity and power, and this extends to the "internal" ethnicities of gender and class. Such internal ethnicities, as writers like Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have shown, represent forms not only of alienation, exclusion and exile (which is already affirmative), but also simulationism and subterfuge; strategies not only for survival but for emancipation. In the figure of Said, the "public intellectual" is transformed imprecisely this way, via the alienations of "the public" and of officially demarcated ethical responsibility, towards that of the outlaw, the "rebel" thinker of social liberties who—in the tradition of Emma Goldman—both threatens and risks the institutions of a civil society that has effectively betrayed its own principles of equality and libertarianism. And perhaps nothing in our contemporary geopolitical situation is more (disfunctionally) emblematic of this state of affairs than Palestine. As Jean-Luc Godard has pointed out: Palestine is both unlucky lucky to have been conquered by Israel: people (in the "West") are interested in plight of Palestine because they are interested in Israel; Israel has made Palestine famous.

Ms Machátová has conducted extensive research in her chosen field, in university libraries in the United States and elsewhere, and has demonstrated a commitment to her subject that is not commonly encountered among students at this level. The breadth of her research extends far beyond the narrow confines of analysis of a selection of literary texts and has caused her to innovate and improvise in her treatment of the primary subject without being unduly distracted by the bulk of secondary and tertiary materials. My concerns stem largely from the time pressure brought to bear upon Ms Machátová in collating materials abroad (a necessity), which has caused a number of purely formal errors or oversights to find their way into the final text—and yet this to no greater extent than one habitually encounters in works prepared for MA defence.

The principle value of Ms Machátová's work is not simply the scope of its research or the fact that she has attempted to engage the work of a locally neglected figure, but that in doing so she has of necessity had to improvise a conceptual framework in which literary theories and critical theories of engagement are obliged to enter into discourse, and to thereby to question the use of concepts (such as that of "representation") within the dominant modes of public discourse in our time—and within whose structures of power Western (English and American) literature, too, remains implicated. For this it is necessary to take the broad view and not esteem merely those literature and theories who class themselves as "post-colonial"—and for this, Ms Machátová's treatment of the broader critical context of Orientalism has served as one of the most satisfying aspects of her dissertation.

Depending upon Ms Machátová's performance at her defence, I recommend that this dissertation be awarded a grade 2/1.

LMM

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