Edward Said's Humanism

Ethical and Political Challenges in Translation

Author: Orazio IRRERA

Translator: Rosanna BONICELLI

It is a well-known fact that Edward Said was a thinker who paid particularly close attention to the political effects of representation, and he has provided important tools for analysing both the mechanisms employed in constructing images with strong Eurocentric and ‘mono-cultural’ connotations, and narratives linked to liberation and the demand for recognition on the part of oppressed and de-centralised political subjectivities. One might even venture to claim that his critical analysis focuses primarily on those culturally and politically sensitive shifts wherein, somehow or other, the problem arises of translating a cultural, political or linguistic otherness from one horizon of meaning to another. It is within this translation process that Said endeavours to show how representation is inextricably linked to certain power-related dynamics, a fact already noted by most experts and by many of those for whom his work has been a fundamental source of inspiration. Much less attention has been paid to an equally important factor in this translation process, namely the ethical and political construction of whoever is featured in the representation, not only as a represented subject or as the subject of representation, but also as a subjectivity interpellated by the interpretive requirements of given representations. This set of problems is neither a corollary in relation to his most celebrated theories, nor a subtext identifiable by way of interpretive over-straining. Quite the contrary: it might be considered one of the main features that he develops throughout his work as a whole, from his first book on Conrad and the important theoretical and methodological arguments in Beginnings through to his last writings on humanism.

This is the reason why understanding such effects of ethical and political subjectivation that are implicit in producing representations, requires reference to the ethical and political problematisation of translation, precisely so as to not fetishise the very notion of representation, thereby cancelling out its continuous differential movement between production and reception. This difference is the site of that productive expression, always temporary and unstable, which is characteristic of translation, of which constant shifts in meaning, on the one hand, jeopardise the metaphysical fixity of the representation itself and, on the other, create ethically and politically relevant effects of subjectivation.

These themes are most explicitly dealt with in Humanism and Democratic Criticism, a posthumous collection of lectures given between 2000 and 2002. In this work Said juxtaposes his political activism as a critic within a democratic society and a set of cultural practices he defines as humanism. Some commentators, since the time of Orientalism, have revealed how the continuous references to the tradition of late bourgeois humanism were extremely problematic since that tradition actually implied
values suggestive of European superiority over other cultures and peoples. Understanding the reason why figures like Erich Auerbach, Ernst Curtius or Leo Spitzer come to represent a kind of paradigm for his own critical consciousness means asking questions concerning the centrality of translation and the dynamics of reception relating to it, proving how it entails a particular relationship between cultural practice and political resistance:

“Humanism is about reading, it is about perspective, and, in our works as humanists, it is about transitions from one realm, one area of human experience to another. It is also about the practice of identities other than those given by the flag or the national war of the moment. The deployment of an alternative identity is what we do when we read and we connect parts of the text to other parts and when we go on to expand the area of attention to include widening circles of pertinence” (HDC, 80).

The notion of translation, though rarely mentioned by Said, is actually at the very heart of the cultural practices of Saidian humanism. Through it, “humanist resistance” emerges as an attempt to direct criticism back to within that “national” societal horizon wherein “the constitution of tradition and the usable past comes up, and that in turn leads us inevitably to belonging and to the national state” (HDC, 75). In this questioning of traditional values and of any monolithic, exclusive sense of “ourselves”, it is easy to grasp the importance and the role of translation for contemporary humanists aiming to reveal “that sense of multiple worlds and complex interacting traditions, that inevitable combination [...] of belonging and detachment, reception and resistance” (HDC, 76). Thus, translation highlights a series of ethical and political aims that enable humanist criticism to proceed while maintaining an unyielding tension between what Said calls the “national” and the “aesthetic”. This tension proves fruitful insofar as it is able to undermine all strategies linked to the semiotics of national political power that aim to consolidate public opinion by constructing tightly enclosed identities fuelled by radical contrasts. Working against these strategies that are encapsulated within the metonym Said calls the “national”, are narrative forms – namely, the “aesthetic” – which, foregrounding the need for translation, introduce a historical perspective and diachronic factors able to expose power strategies linked to the assertion of a “mono-cultural” and “mono-linguistic” perspective:

“What then can be more fitting for the humanist in the United States than to accept responsibility for maintaining rather than resolving the tension between the aesthetic and the national, using the former to challenge, re-examine and resist the latter in those slow but rational modes of reception and understanding which is the humanist’s way? As for making those connections that allow us to see part and whole, that is the main thing: what to connect with, how, and how not?” (HDC, 78).

It is apparent from this passage how the urgent need for political resistance relates to something altogether more profound, namely to “philological reception”: “I see no way at all of introducing resistance without the prior discussion of reception [...]”; that process of reading and philological reception is the irreducible core” (HDC, 70). Reading, philological reception and translation thereby stand within a homogeneous set of
cultural practices that characterise Said’s humanism as something entirely separate from the unhistorical and universal values that are to be re-discovered or re-activated, but which instead concerns its own practical and ethical nature, that is to say something beyond the cognitive and epistemological compass, linked merely to a process of cultural decoding. The translation itself that is implied in the philological reception to which Said refers, therefore, involves something more, something inherent in the subjectivation of whoever applies this set of practices:

“And I think it is important to say that for the humanist, the act of reading is the act therefore of first putting oneself in the position of the author, for whom writing is a series of decisions and choices expressed in words. It need hardly be said that no author is completely sovereign or above the time, place, and circumstances of his or her life, so that these, too, must be understood if one is to put oneself in the author’s position sympathetically” (HDC, 62, my italics).

At first glance it seems most striking that Said, by using the English term “sympathy” and its derivatives (“sympathetic” and “sympathetically”), repeatedly describes the relationship connecting the Philologist’s reading and translation as a kind of empathy. This is a surprising move insofar as the idea of reducing to nothing the distance between one era and another or between one subject and another seems more like an eighteenth-century historiographic myth than a research path that is feasible to follow nowadays. Nonetheless, such a standpoint is reasserted in the following lecture, namely the Introduction to Auerbach’s Mimesis\(^2\). Dealing with methodological notions belonging to philological practice, Said asserts:

“In order to be able to understand a humanistic text, one must try to do so as if one is the author of that text, living the author’s reality, undergoing the kind of life experiences intrinsic to the author’s life, and so forth, all by that combination of erudition and sympathy that is the hallmark of philological hermeneutics. Thus the line between actual events and the modifications of one’s own reflective mind is blurred [...]. [The author’s] relationship to his age [is] an organic and integral one, a kind of self-making within the context of the specific dynamics of society at a very precise moment in its development. Moreover, the relationship between the reader-critic and the text is transformed, from a one-way interrogation of the historical text by an altogether alien mind at a much later time, into a sympathetic dialogue of two spirits across ages and cultures who are able to communicate with each other as friendly respectful intelligences trying to understand each other from the other’s perspective” (HDC, 91-92; my italics, original version slightly readapted by me).

To explain this peculiar revisionist practice on the critic’s part we ought somehow to revolve what Said implies with regard to the object of interpretation (the literary text) upon the practice of humanistic “translation”, which thus emerges in turn as a process of self-making by the reader-critic himself. In other words, the epistemological scope of empathy/sympathy must be reduced in terms of its constituting a mode of knowledge; Said, in fact, constantly reminds us how philological interpretation is characterised by an unyielding subjective element that denies this kind of knowledge the precision of
scientific disciplines. For the Palestinian scholar, this “border between actual events and the mental re-elaboration that modifies them [and which] appears blurred” constitutes a “tragic weakness” that is congenital to any philological and historiographic reconstruction on the humanist’s part.

If this subjective element concerning representation that so affects an author’s work, just as much as the critic’s philological and historiographic research, does indeed obstruct any kind of definitive or complete “translation”, then the empathic relationship to which Said refers ought not to be viewed simply as the element that reduces the distance between philologist, humanist, historian, and the authors and texts they work to interpret, but rather as a practice that at the very most creates a “critical distance” in relation to the cultural horizon within which intellectuals are used to interpreting their texts (what Auerbach called Ansatzpunkt). Sympathy, therefore, is not (at least, it is not exclusively and maybe not even primarily) a means for accessing texts and authors that are far-off in time, but a practice of (partial) separation from one’s present-day horizon of meaning. Philological practice, seen as a combination of erudition and sympathy, is thus above all a self-based practice, or a spiritual exercise. It is no coincidence that the opening words to the Introduction to Erich Auerbach’s Mimesis are a quote from Gabriel García Márquez, saying that: “Human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers give birth to them, but that life obliges them to give birth to themselves” (HDC, 86).

However, the fact that this ethical, practical question of self-making is the most peculiar feature of humanistic practice as Said understands it is also confirmed by the fundamental juxtaposition the Palestinian scholar makes between the reception that characterises philology and what in Islamic culture is termed ijtihad. Said points out that as it is impossible, according to Islam, to achieve full knowledge of the Koran, being the Word of God, it must nonetheless be incessantly read and re-read. Referring to the literal meaning of the contents of these scriptures entails consideration of earlier readings which have followed one upon the other, growing, we might say, into a system of interdependent readings in an effort to get as close as possible to the roots of the text. Accessing the truth of it is clearly impossible, but what does remain fundamental to this practice of interpretation and reading is, in fact, “a component of personal commitment and extraordinary effort, called “ijtihad” in Arabic […]. Ijtihad derives from the same root as the now notorious word jihad, which does not mainly mean holy war but rather a primarily spiritual exertion on behalf of the truth” (HDC, 68-69).

Ferial J. Ghazoul has stressed what Said sees as the centrality of metaphor to the text within Islamic culture, wherein the world is interpreted through the text, the Koran – this type of translational function might suggest a critical attitude towards the “text”, preserving it more for the kind of activity the text stimulates than for cementing it as a static object of worship. Thereby Said “humanises” texts, attributing a worldly quality to them and positing them as relevant to human experience in historical and political terms. Studying canonical texts means, for Said, continuing to search for new ways of altering and translating them in order to create new meanings within the context of emerging requirements and practices. Similarly, Abdirahman Hussein suggests tracing the ethical and political peculiarity of this process back to Beginnings, wherein the idea of beginning overlaps significantly with those strategies of will, of constructivism and of fiction that allow the “truth” to be perceived as something that, quite apart from being
“revealed”, must instead be “performed”\textsuperscript{6}.
However, if reception, as a constitutive feature of philological practice, is based on \textit{ijtihad}, namely on a fully-fledged “spiritual exercise”, to Said it appears nonetheless limited by the interpretative conventions of any given era: “But I am right in saying that at the limits of what is permissible in any personal effort to understand a text’s rhetorical and semantic structure are the requirements of jurisprudence, narrowly speaking, plus the conventions and mentalities, speaking more broadly, of an age. Law, \textit{qanun}, is what, in the public realm, governs or has hegemony over acts of personal initiative even when freedom of expression is decently available” (HDC, 69).
In order that this tension between \textit{ijtihad} and \textit{qanun} be conceived as key to understanding what implications translation has for Saidian humanism, it is worth noting how it relates to the other two areas of tension that we have seen to characterise humanism insofar as its comprising reception/translation and resistance – the tension between “aesthetic” and “national” on the one hand and that between detachment and belonging on the other. In the lecture entitled \textit{Humanism’s Sphere}, it is suggested that \textit{qanun} is one of the possible etymological roots of the word ‘canon’. This etymology invites philological practice to measure itself against everything that is defined as canonical or is likewise canonised, in the case both of various “inventions of tradition” by nationalisms and, conversely, of the canon of literary texts that are considered the foremost expressions of a given cultural tradition. In either case, for the Palestinian scholar, we are dealing with “a supposed opposition between what is designated as traditional and canonical and the unwelcome interventions of the new and the intellectually representative of the age we live in” (HDC, 23). In light of this situation, Said argues that “every language must be relativised by change”, and that accepting the new must be a fundamental feature of a humanist approach, marked for this same reason by the inevitability of translation. On the other hand, faced with this “binding and legalistic meaning” of the term canon, there does also exist a second etymological root:

“The other is a musical one, canon as a contrapuntal form employing numerous voices in usually strict imitation of each other, a form, in other words, expressing motion, playfulness, discovery, and, in the rhetorical sense, invention. Viewed this way, the canonical humanities, far from being a rigid tablet of fixed rules and monuments bullying us from the past […] will always remain open to changing combinations of sense and signification; every reading and interpretation of a canonical work reanimates it in the present, furnishes an occasion for rereading, allows the modern and the new to be situated together in a broad historical field whose usefulness is that it shows us history as an agonistic process still being made, rather than finished and settled once and for all” (HDC, 25).

From this passage it becomes even clearer how what Homi Bhabha calls “a form of affiliation but also a partial substitution and subversion of authorial sovereignty in favor of the critic’s revisionary practice”, can lead the translation process to be viewed from a philological standpoint as “an ironic and agonistic mode of humanistic resistance”\textsuperscript{2}. Thus, the tension between “aesthetic” and “national” or, in Bhabha’s words, between “performative” and “pedagogical” does not only concern production of alternative histories and representations but also the performative function of the narratives
themselves⁸. One of the most significant features of this complex process of reception and translation is, therefore, an effort to separate and detach oneself from one’s own set of values in order to open up new paths and subjectivation strategies that are fundamental to the simple methodology our own hermeneutic activities entail, and which are actually part of the humanist’s own subjectivity. It is not so much a question of faith in being able to break the hermeneutic circle as of the ethical and political need to problematise all kinds of affiliation that impede recognition of what appears unknown, marginal, or decentred.

Once again the figure of Erich Auerbach helps to throw light on the ethical characteristic linked to empathy/sympathy as a practice which, in the attempt to cut the gap between one era and another or between one subject and another, ends up relativising both one’s own point of view and cultural belonging. For Said, this is the moral core of Auerbach’s background in relation to his historical context:

“The heart of the hermeneutical enterprise was to develop over the years a very particular kind of sympathy toward texts from different periods and different cultures. For a German whose specialty was Romance literature, this sympathy took on an almost ideological cast, given that there had been a long period of historical enmity between Prussia and France, the most powerful and competitive of its neighbors and antagonist. As a specialist in Romance languages, the German scholar had a choice either to enlist on behalf of Prussian nationalism (as Auerbach did as a soldier during the First World War) and study “the enemy” with skill and insight as a part of the continuing war effort, or, as was the case with Auerbach and his peers, to overcome bellicosity and what we now call “the clash of civilizations” with a welcoming, hospitable attitude of humanistic knowledge designed to realign warring cultures in a relationship of mutuality and reciprocity” (HDC, 93).

Here, the double tension between aesthetic and national and between belonging and detachment reveals its full range of ethical and political implications, creating kinds of affiliation or, we might say, of subjectivation that are critically removed from idées reçues and from the polemic that acritically permeated a national community. Moreover, the passage just quoted also serves to dispel certain doubts arising from the fact that the Mimesis text may seem to be permeated by the idea of a culture that is classified only as European and, all things considered, Eurocentric. Said is less concerned with Auerbach’s specific interpretations of fundamental European literary texts (despite his sincere admiration for these) than with his peculiar approach which, along the lines of the old Goethian notion of Weltliteratur, is characterised by an ethical and critical attempt to move beyond oppositions and hostilities pertaining to individual national cultures, highlighting how philological practice acts as an antidote against obstinate devotion to the dogmatic exclusivism of given traditions or, as Said often puts it, including in these lectures, the particularistic and national sense of “ourselves”. The Goethian ideal of the unity of human history was indeed perceived by Auerbach from an oppositional standpoint and, although he outlined a framework for study and a field of interest that was certainly European and Eurocentric, he also hinted at – something of the utmost importance for Said – an attitude tending towards detachment from personal affiliations and that is able to make the humanist more willing to understand the Other:
“But for most of his working life as a Romance philologist, he was a man with a mission, a European (and Eurocentric) mission it is true, but something he deeply believed in for its emphasis on the unity of human history, the possibility it granted of understanding inimical and perhaps even hostile Others despite the bellicosity of modern cultures and nationalisms, and the optimism with which one could enter into the inner life of a distant author or historical epoch even with a healthy awareness of one’s limitations of perspective and insufficiency of knowledge” (HDC, 95-96).

However, we might venture further and argue that knowledge of one’s own individual limitations is the result of the performative function of philological practice itself (reception, reading, and translation) in the sense that, through patient, erudite and detailed study, this aims at “a perspectival formation of judgment, which makes it possible to accord the various epochs and cultures their own presupposition and views, to strive to the utmost toward the discovery of those, and to dismiss as unhistorical and dilettantish every absolute assessment of phenomena that is brought in from outside” (HDC, 96-97), as outlined in a passage from Mimesis related by Said.

In order to further investigate the performative dynamics that characterise practices of philological reception and cross-cultural translation, we must not underestimate the question of exile and its importance to this comparative approach, marked as it is by a certain cosmopolitan universalism. The exile experience, as we know, is in fact a biographical factor the importance of which to Said himself is undeniable. Nonetheless, Auerbach is yet again the key point of reference in illustrating the relationship between humanism and exile, given the constant references to the make-up of Mimesis and Auerbach’s own experience of exile. In all his major works Said never fails to mention the circumstances that brought Mimesis into being, tracing them back to Auerbach’s own testimonies at the end of his book. During the Second World War, having fled to Istanbul to escape racial persecution, the scholar tells of how, in Turkey, he encountered a lack of libraries suitably equipped for comparative literary studies, or how the critical texts he did possess were not necessarily the latest editions, and how he was ultimately out of touch with recent articles on the works and authors he was working on while writing Mimesis. In truth, as Said himself points out, “it was precisely his distance from home – in all sense of that word – that made possible the superb undertaking of Mimesis” (SC, 6). It was indeed by means of exile that Auerbach was able to see that detaching oneself from one’s own national affiliation made it possible to create a work of such vast scope in light of a comparative dimension that out-stretches any national horizon. Auerbach himself claims that had he been in Europe he would not have tackled such a bold undertaking.

The author’s distancing from his own tradition, imposed upon him by those specific circumstances, imbues Mimesis with a substance that goes beyond the erudition and ability it reveals, since such a wide vision, a true synthesis of Western culture, was “matched in importance by the very gesture of doing it” (O, 260, my italics). What the writing of Mimesis implies, as a performative gesture, “is not, as it has so frequently been taken to be, only a massive reaffirmation of the Western cultural tradition, but also a work built upon a critically important alienation from it, a work whose conditions and circumstances of existence are not immediately derived from the culture it describes
with such extraordinary insight and brilliance but built rather on an agonizing distance from it” (SC, 8). To underline the practical-performative nature of this humanistic project by the comparative literature scholar, Said also points out how Auerbach, precisely along the lines of Giambattista Vico, believes that “philological work deals with humanity at large and transcends national boundaries. As he says, “our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation”” (SC, 7). The immediate upshot of such a claim, as the Palestinian scholar has already noted in Orientalism, is that “the more one is able to leave one’s cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision. The more easily, too, does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance” (O, 260).

The fact that this practice of detachment figures within a similar ethical-practical context to that of spiritual exercises can ultimately be deduced from Said’s persistent references in his major works to Auerbach’s quotation from The Didascalicon by Hugh of Saint Victor, which highlights the asceticism the philologist must apply in order to distance himself from his own affiliations and be able to reach a deeper understanding of the texts he is working on, but above all to entirely transform his way of seeing the world and himself:

“It is therefore, a source of great virtue for the practiced mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about in visible and transitory things, so that afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. The person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong person has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his”.

This progressive asceticism marks the path whereon the paradigm of such moral perfectionism is precisely the model of critical consciousness that Said borrows from Auerbach and, by way of him, from the whole philological tradition that dates back, at the very least, to Vico. However, it is essential to note that this passage does not speak of a need for absolute detachment from one’s own tradition. The asceticism in question does not constitute a withdrawal from the world or entail limiting philological activity to within the narrow confines of personal and solitary scholarship. As has already been mentioned, these practices, by way of the detachment they impose upon the subjectivity they create, also create a particular kind of belonging. Commenting once again on this passage in Culture and Imperialism, Said wittily points out:

“But note that Hugo twice makes it clear that “strong” or “perfect” person achieves independence and detachment by working through attachments, not by rejecting them. Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and a real bond with one’s native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss. Regard experience then as if they were about to disappear: what is it about them that anchors or roots them in reality? What would you save of them, what would you give up, what would you recover? To answer such questions you must have the independence and detachment of someone whose...
homeland is “sweet”, but whose actual condition makes it impossible to recapture that sweetness, and even less possible to derive satisfaction from substitutes furnished by illusion or dogma, whether deriving from pride in one’s heritage or from certainty about who “we” are” (CI, 336).

Thereby, the belonging to which this detachment is related constitutes a willingness to go beyond one’s own tradition while at the same time interpreting it as consistently as possible. However, Said does not fail elsewhere to recount another important point made by Auerbach, whereby “the most priceless and indispensable part of a philologist’s heritage is still his own nation’s culture and heritage. Only when he is first separated from this heritage, however, and then transcends it does it become truly effective” (SC, 7). In the context of this asceticism, the repeated process of reading, reception, and translation of every detail obliges the scholar to identify the difference that separates these writings from his own age. This practice of “translation” leads to a wider perspective which facilitates a return to those new features that impinge upon established, canonised values in order that they be brought into question. This is why by keeping faith in the spirit of Weltliteratur, Eurocentric assumptions can be transcended, with a radicalisation of the implicit performative importance of philological practice and of the inevitability of translation.

In Said’s view, Weltliteratur can be effective if it reaches beyond itself, beyond Auerbach, towards new linguistic and literary experiences that demand recognition within the process of global comparison that lies at the heart of philological interpretation and of comparative literary studies as a whole. The political value of relativising monolithic and dualistic attachments, both linked to an exclusivist notion of “ourselves”, is clear. It is within this entirely worldly context, in fact, that the philologist’s work can no longer focus upon one’s own past tradition, but must open itself up to a kind of ‘counterpoint’ concerning a plot the lines of which always begin in the present, namely from “the undocumented turbulence of unsettled and unhoused exiles, immigrants, itinerant or captive populations for whom no document, no adequate expression yet exists to take account of what they go through […]. Humanism, I strongly believe, must excavate the silences, the world of memory, of itinerant, barely surviving groups, the places of exclusion and invisibility, the kind of testimony that doesn’t make it onto the reports” (HDC, 81).

The textuality with which the Saidian humanist has to deal must be tackled through a genealogical commitment that is a feature of a conflict-ridden present, creating by means of translation a framework able to link present to past through a series of contrapuntal historical narratives. These latter, thanks to their performative function, are in turn able to create emergent and critical subjectivities that can independently negotiate the borders and rules affecting one’s own cultural and political space. In contrast to scholars like Auerbach, Spitzer and others or, perhaps we should say, radicalising their philological practice, the Saidian humanist is concerned with a textuality that is to be reconstructed and translated, starting from an societal and political horizon marked by conflict and power relations. In the face of this conflict Said’s critical agenda should prioritise those subjectivities and communities whose existence is jeopardised or even brutally denied. Thereby, reception/translation and resistance again emerge as the two fundamental gestures of this same practice that is the domain of the
specific model of ethical and political subjectivity that is the Saidian humanist.
Traduit de l’italien vers l’anglais par Rosanna Bonicelli.

Notes

4 Pierre Hadot himself has reflected upon philological practice as a fully-fledged spiritual exercise; see his preface to the French translation of E. Bertram, Nietzsche: essai de mythologie, Éd. du Félin, Paris 1990, pp. 32-34.
9 E. Auerbach, Mimesis, op. cit., pp. 15-16.