

## Edward W. Said's Presidency

To the Editor:

There are times when even a small decision about whether to renew membership in a large professional organization turns into a question of conscience. With the scheduled accession of Edward W. Said to the presidency of the Modern Language Association on 1 January 1999, I regret that I must resign from the association as of 31 December 1998.

The president of the MLA publicly and officially represents the organization. I believe that such a representative should have displayed regularly not only distinction in critical scholarship but also dignity in the public treatment of others. Edward Said's professional work has extensively influenced several fields of literary study. But his public assaults against individuals whose views reasonably differ from his own deeply violate fundamental values repeatedly professed by the MLA. At times such assaults have passed beyond the forms of disparagement that often compromise contemporary academic disputes. They have passed into acts of aggressive contempt and blatant dehumanization.

The variety of disturbing cases includes an exchange many years ago with several members of the MLA ("An Exchange on Edward Said and Difference," *Critical Inquiry* 15 [1989]: 611–46). In a detailed article, one scholar argued that greater accuracy and breadth of information would noticeably revise Said's claims about the Middle East (Robert J. Griffin, "Ideology and Misrepresentation: A Response to Edward Said"). In his reply ("Response"), Said tried to discredit alternately the author's sanity, his scholarship, and his humanity. His "solemn idiocies," cried Said, "inhabit a semideranged world entirely his own." This scholar—"if that is what he is," scoffed Said—is "only, to the best of my knowledge, the author of two (or is it three?) below-average articles on Dr. Johnson." "I surmise," Said postured, that "Griffin is actually 'Griffin,' an ideological simulacrum"; it could be asked "if he is a human being."

Perhaps even more than the original critique, Said's reaction exposed some of the stark deficiencies of his own claims, including his profession to speak for the cause of humane behavior. In the same exchange, when two other members of the MLA appealed for a dialogue (Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Toward a Dialogue with Edward Said"), Said replied with a modified form of derision. When another scholar (Geoffrey Hartman) later protested Said's effort to dehumanize the original critic, Said referred again to his doubt about whether Robert Griffin was a "human being." As for Hartman's

perspective, Said sought to degrade it as "patronizing and hypocritical self-congratulation" that was "tasteless and jejune" but "not surprising" ("Editorial Note," *Critical Inquiry* 16 [1989]: 199–200).

Such assaults of course are no less offensive when applied to individuals outside the MLA, such as a prominent intellectual (Michael Walzer) whom Said tried to demean as a "small frightened man" (Walzer and Said, "An Exchange: 'Exodus and Revolution,'" *Grand Street* 5 [1986]: 246–59). The attacks repeatedly flaunt the twists of mind that underlie them. Unlike the "serious" opponent he had "made him up" to be, Said sneered, the "real" Walzer was a "good deal worse than the fiction I created." But Said concealed the fact that he himself fabricated this supposedly "real" Walzer. He "clearly venerates" a "nasty wave" of "Ayatollahs," exploded Said, who accused him of supporting several attitudes toward Israel opposed by Walzer himself. A figure of "characteristic idiocy," concluded Said.

It should be stressed that Edward Said does not confine his insults to Jewish intellectuals with whom he disagrees. He has scorned Fouad Ajami as "a mediocre scholar"; Samir al-Khalil broadly "seems quite incapable of argument, scholarship, or rational exchange"; Afsaneh Najmabadi expresses "wacky" or "puerile" views (Najmabadi, "Said's War on the Intellectuals," with Said's reply, *Middle East Report* Nov.-Dec. 1991: 2+). Still, he reserves special aspersions for individuals he attempts to discredit by association with Israel. He has concocted the accusation that a renowned scholar (Bernard Lewis) "seems to advocate" expelling Palestinian Arabs (Said and Lewis, in "Orientalism: An Exchange," *New York Review of Books* 12 Aug. 1982: 44–48). The more reflective the critique of his views, the more enraged his reaction. When confronted with his insults (like those quoted in this letter), he cries that his own integrity is being impugned.

The repugnant language of the incoming spokesman of the Modern Language Association cannot be excused by the claim that the cause for which he speaks grants him a special license for abuse. Others with urgent causes of their own have persisted in seeking a language of civil exchange under severely trying conditions. Nor is the need for such a language merely a point of etiquette; it is a principle of ethics, the obligation to engage even adversaries as human beings with a capacity for understanding. Yet to my knowledge Edward Said has never repudiated the derogatory expressions to which I have referred. Will he inform his colleagues in the MLA if he still endorses those expressions?

To choose to remain in a professional organization, of course, does not necessarily imply agreeing with every position taken by its members or its president. In this case,

however, the question of assenting to a presidency involves a broader principle. For in his imperious attempts to humiliate or delegitimize a variety of individuals who have challenged his positions, Edward Said has tended to undermine the principle of conscientious choice itself.

Many in the MLA, I realize, will consider the renewal of membership in the coming year on the basis of factors other than those I have described. But I hope that at least some, including those who initially voted for Edward Said, will assess once more whether they wish to be represented by the incoming president. For me, in any case, it would be impossible to be part of an organization over which Edward Said presides. I would be misrepresented the moment he professed to speak for or about me.

JON WHITMAN  
*The Hebrew University of Jerusalem*

**Reply:**

Jon Whitman's earnest but disingenuous letter requires response and correction. He seems to think that my "accession" (his word) to the MLA presidency is the result of a coup or a dynastic privilege: it was in fact the result of an election. Three years after that election Whitman wants to resign in rather too strenuous protest. Why did he wait so long, and why act as if a democratic process doesn't satisfy him?

All the comments he ascribes to me occurred in specific, extremely combative contexts in which I was attacked first at least as unreasonably as anything I either thought or said afterward. *Everything* Whitman quotes was extracted from my responses. He simply omits any mention of this fact. And, though he has been such an as-

siduous researcher, he doesn't seem to know that many of the people he claims I've dehumanized are friends with whom I still have cordial relations. He says nothing about the relentless verbal attacks on me (e.g., Edward Alexander—also a literary scholar—"The Professor of Terror," *Commentary* Aug. 1989) or the death threats I've received or the burning of my office in 1985 by people he would perhaps recognize politically.

What is most dishonest is, of course, that Whitman first sets up a false criterion of his own for MLA presidents ("dignity in the public treatment of others") and then neglects to mention that one of the real sources of his animus (and of the inordinate amount of time he must have spent trawling in a lot of marginal writing) resembles that of a partisan, recently nationalized Israeli, once again fighting a Palestinian. Whitman's letter is, I believe, an extension of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict masked as an argument against public misbehaving; it is drenched in the usual hypocrisy about norms of conduct, a tactic employed by publicists who try to hide their real agenda. Who has appointed Whitman referee anyway?

Lastly, and sadly for me, Whitman also chooses not to mention that some of his unreasonableness may derive from the (perhaps regretted) fact that he was my undergraduate student—amiable, respectful, never contentious—for some years at Columbia. Whatever oedipal rebellion he may now be enacting can't change the past any more than Israel's intransigent bellicosity can change the fact of its fifty-year dispossession of the Palestinian people, the destruction of their society, and the illegal military occupation of their territories.

EDWARD W. SAID  
*Columbia University*