

Theory Travels – but does it get there?

Piers Smith

English Dept., Faculty of Arts, Kuwait University

arab journal for the humanities

205

Issue 84 / 21

Abstract

This paper takes Edward Said's essay 'Traveling Theory' as the basis for an examination of theory's contemporary journeys through Arab Gulf countries in general and to Kuwait in particular. It starts with an interrogation of Said's terms, noting the Euro-American orientation of his argument, while stressing practical or enabling elements as these may apply in academic situations in other regions of the world. Then it considers the precise itinerary of Said's account, using this to establish a) the actual conditions under which theory may be said to go somewhere and b) what happens to it when it does get there. After examining the pitfalls theory may undergo on its travels, both across the global landscape and through Arabic-speaking communities, the paper concludes with an analysis of theory as it used in, or adapted for, specific Kuwaiti conditions.

Although it is twenty years since Edward Said first published his essay on travelling theory, his argument still has considerable freshness and weight. 'Like people and schools of criticism', he writes, 'ideas and theories travel – from person to person, from situation to situation, from one period to another' (1991: 226).¹ And he continues: 'Cultural and intellectual life are usually nourished and even sustained by this circulation of ideas' (226). The question that arises is how far theory travels in our world today – specifically in the Arab Gulf.

Said does not explain quite what he means by 'theory', although he does refer to 'the writing and interpretation of texts' (230) and to 'a response to a specific social and historical situation of which an intellectual occasion is a part' (237); but, implicitly, his argument associates theory with literary criticism – an association which survives in most references to the subject today, even in those which seek to move beyond theory altogether.² At the same time, Said's emphasis on the social and historical situatedness of texts registers the movement of literary analysis away from the formal parameters of what was once known as 'literary studies' into the broader realm of cultural production. Nowadays, theory is actively engaged not only with the social and the historical contexts of production but also with social issues in general, with race studies, questions of identity and the subject, practices of gender and sexuality, colonial space and its aftermath, the inter-cultural effects of globalisation.³

Said also does not directly deal with what, for many, increasingly seems to predetermine the meaning and production of almost all theory – its West-based provenance. Awareness of this has entailed 'a new marking of the "West" as a site of ongoing power and contestation, of centrality and dispersal', as the cultural analyst James L. Clifford puts it.⁴ Just like McDonalds burgers, Hollywood movies and designer clothes, theory is dispersed (or dispensed) not only to Euro-American settings but also to all points beyond them. Just as fast food and fast films have become a profitable export to other consumer cultures, so has glamorously packaged fast theory – only consider that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose Anti-Oedipus and A Thousand Plateaux have been among theory's latest new things over the past decade, are sometimes referred to as D & G. And just as in the case of burgers and action movies, this marketing of thought appears to incorporate a battery of attributes and implications which some see as inextricably tied to Euro-American communal perspectives and value-systems and others as an inevitable consequence of globalisation – one which is, therefore, open to a less geographically restricted 'multiculturalist' contestation than the one Clifford appears to allow for.

Nevertheless, responding to today's 'postcolonial confusions' which seek to 'scramble' locations by including the claims of counter-discourses, other voices, histories and narratives, Clifford makes a stab at a more inclusive and generous definition than that which other critics may sometimes take for granted: theory is 'any comparative knowledge about the histories and forms of collective life'.⁵ Comparative need not refer to discrete cultural writings (as in Comparative Literature); it may simply refer to any other knowledges. Collective life is life as lived by any community at any time and in any place. Theory, then, can be a pretty general catch-all for what is compared and passed on about communities and their histories throughout the world. In this sense, its passage involves local and global migrations, not just European or Euro-American circulation.

But that is not really how Said's essay sees it. Clifford intimates as much, when he unpacks the word a little more. When he takes the word apart, he shows why Said should find it so natural to conjoin it with the metaphor of travel. In its early Greek form, *theorein* referred to 'a practice of travel and observation, a man sent by the polis to another city to witness a religious ceremony'. In the context of that etymology, Said's linkage is exact, and also suggestive. The Greek theorist travels, witnesses, compares (between the polis and the new city), and arrives at a judgement. But, as Clifford points out, in this special case, the theorist begins and ends his travels in the same place, in the home polis. This, as he says, is no longer true.

Today, travelling theory – or the theorist – takes a far less predictable route, one that need not, as Said's essay suggests, follow a fairly straightforward linear route through more or less unmarked space. It may involve a round-trip, a shuttle service, globe-trotting, stopovers, a one-way ticket, stowaways, people-smuggling, hazardous mountain tracks, body searches, false papers, no papers, drifting, disguise, disappearance. It may involve something as recondite or condensed as American ivy-league journals or European *festschriften*. It may involve something as diffuse and speedy as a world-wide web, or something as laconic, short-lived and meandering as postcards, graffiti, commercial slogans or word-of-mouth. And yet, notwithstanding Clifford's free-floating definition (or his optimism), Said's implicit limitation on theory's movement is not wholly redundant: in almost all cases, theory's point of origin – its airport of departure, so to speak – still has a Euro-American location.

In Arab-speaking regions, theory certainly travels, but it does not move around in quite the effortless and uncomplicated way Said's essay suggests. What is produced locally may quickly vanish into the limbo of

state proscription or cultural resistance, forgetting or (in this market-driven world) uncompetitive superfluity. Significantly, that which does circulate – though rarely as far as West-based publications – tends to keep beating the same path, instead of following a fork in the road, opening up new routes in and to other places. In literary and post-colonial studies, for example, the excessive investment in Said's own work on Orientalism – as encapsulated in the trilogy Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient (1978), The Question of Palestine (1979) and Covering Islam (1980), and the later work Blaming the Victim (1988) – and the tireless, often uncritical repetition of its main thesis, along with indifference to its caveats, is a case in point.⁶ In the social sciences to give a second, perhaps better circulated example, under-examined methodological assumptions – evident in the reliance on over-determined empirical models of knowledge (statistical data), as indices of 'objective truth' – combined with an unquestioning use of Euro-American government or institution-sponsored research is another.⁷ There are, of course, complex reasons for this, and these, as I will argue, have nothing to do with obsession, cognitive dissonance, mimicry or 'mindset' and everything to do with opportunity.

Nor does theory enjoy a particularly smooth ride from Euro-American settings to Arabic-speaking communities. To make it out of the departure lounge, it needs a reliable carrier or sponsor (Said speaks of a 'careful' reader). It can suffer an early demise or drastic reduction, not only if it is not internalised, or not understood, at the start, but also if it is hacked apart in the interests of saving space. It may not even make it out of the departure lounge at all – something else, a double or impostor, may leave in its place. In other cases, on arrival, it may undergo the ideational and psychological equivalent of a strip-search, losing what is left of its baggage, and even the shirt off its back.

If anything does make it through Immigration at the other end, it may not prove of much use through lack of any sort of market for its specialised type of nutrition. Sometimes all that is left is what is chunkily re-gurgitated or wistfully sniffed after, in local journals or public lectures as part of the scholarship wars of citation and validation – the fate of all knowledges that are acquired only for 'competency' programmes, doctoral accreditation or a career. In extreme cases, it may undergo experimental surgery and a kind of Island-of-Doctor Moreau stitch-up, emerging as something monstrous and incommunicable. At other times, it is left to gather dust in a basement somewhere. Once again, there are reasons for all of this, some of which can be traced back to local conditions and agenda; others are the result of systemic delimitations on the transfer of knowledges from the West.

The questions Said was interested in raising, however, were not about the movements of theory across linguistic, cultural, economic, political or cognitive hurdles, or about border crossings, as such; he was interested in theory's reception (theory, that is, always imagined as the same coherent set of ideas as originally propounded), in the readers or critics – in those, to extend the metaphor, who sponsor theory's arrival, meet it at the airport, and then do their best to help it find a residency – and what they do with it thereafter. As Said imagines them, these critical sponsors are linguistic, cultural and intellectual coequals. They are also all Europeans.

A much-remarked feature of Said's essay is that his sponsors all occupy a privileged place of reception and dissemination; and theory's journey is limited to European border crossings – from Hungary to France to England. The rest of the world does not get a look in, or is only there (on the peripheries of Said's argument) as a kind of implication, a remote horizon. Nevertheless, even though this omission may seem to epitomise a larger presumption, Said's argument still has great utility for travelling theory in other regions of the world today.

Said's Travelling Theory

Said divides theory's journey into four stages:

First, there is a point of origin, or what seems like one, a set of initial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse. Second, there is a distance traversed, a passage through the pressure of various contexts as the idea moves from an earlier point to another time and place where it will come into a new prominence. Third, there is a set of conditions – call them conditions of acceptance or, as an inevitable part of acceptance, resistances – which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be. Fourth, the now fully (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new uses, its new position in a new time and place (226-227).

Whether theory travels only in Europe or not, it would still seem to obey these prescriptions. The 'set of initial circumstances' presupposes emergence from a temporally and geographically limited location and intellectual context. Thus, Said describes Georg Lukacs' History and Class Consciousness (1923) as arising out of the conjuncture of early twentieth-century German philosophy, Marxist thought and the revolutionary struggles of the Hungarian Soviet Republic of 1919. Lukacs' theory of the relationship between 'reification' and 'class consciousness' –

his 'theory of theory', as Said puts it – then travels to Paris, where, under pressure of a different context, it is transformed into the ideas of Lucien Goldmann's Le Dieu Caché (1955) (translated into English as The Hidden God (1964)). Lukacs' ideas then travel, as carried by Goldmann, to Cambridge University, in England, where they are heard (in 1970) and modified in turn by Raymond Williams, according to a new set of initial circumstances.

For Said, the differences between the three theorists have to do with local biographical and social factors. Where Lukacs is a 'directly involved militant', responding to a crisis in Hungary, Goldmann is 'an expatriate researcher at the Sorbonne' (234) at a remove from contemporary struggle, applying the implications of Lukacs' thought to a critical situation located in the less immediate past. What in Lukacs is 'an ironic discrepancy between theoretical consciousness and reified reality' becomes in Goldmann's hands 'a tragic correspondence between world vision and the unfortunate class situation of the noblesse de robe in late seventeenth-century France' (235). By contrast, Williams is a 'literary scholar', formed by 'a tradition of Cambridge English studies', responding to a state of scholarship that has little to do with the demands of a radically changing social reality (237). Williams is 'a reflective critic', not 'a committed revolutionary' (238). Consequently, seeing 'the limits of a theory that begins as a liberating idea but can become a trap of its own' (238), he uses Goldmann's adaptation of Lukacs' ideas about reification and totality to construct his own theory of 'alternative or emergent acts and intentions' within any dominant or totalising social system (240).

Theory travels from Budapest to Cambridge, losing much of its revolutionary fire en route but gaining something in complexity and new emphases, as a result of the sorts of pressures changed circumstances (from tumultuous Budapest to the calm, socially closeted and donnish Cambridge of the 1970s) have given it. The point of origin, with its prime motivators of class consciousness, solidarity and insurgency in the face of a capitalistic dehumanising of the proletariat, provides an emphasis (on the totalising effects of reification), for which the last stage on the journey has no use, or rather finds a productive inappropriateness, emphasising, as a result, the potential for modes of resistance overlooked by the hammer-and-anvil of confrontational political thought. Theory's passage thus involves a graduated thinning out, or subtilising, of master-concepts, from place and through time, so that where Lukacs may write a theory of theory, as totalising as the system it critiques, which he will later repudiate, and Goldmann mere variations on the theme, Williams produces criticism sensitive to changed (and always potentially changing) social conditions.

A feature of Said's analysis of this movement is his argument's abrupt shift of gears, or slippage, from a story of a theory's migration (theory as illustration) to what any application of theory can demonstrate about theory as a closed system (theory as trap), as always and invariably true whatever the situation. A story of the passage of theory from one location to another becomes a story of theory's foreclosing dangers. Williams' own analysis of those dangers, which is quoted by Said, and which prompts the gear-shift to a warning against theoretical closure, displaces the principle of adaptation.

What is left behind in this shift is the rest of the story: Williams' earlier history of theoretical analysis which anticipates the encounter with Goldmann, providing both the conditions of his acceptance or resistance and the grounds for his notion of the trap of theory. Arguably, his encounter with Lukacs' thought, via Goldmann's, only adds a further refinement to his already inaugurated project of attending to lived contradictions and resistances and changing structures – or, as he calls them elsewhere, 'structures of feeling' and 'emergent and residual' formations⁸ – within (according to the Gramscian model) any hegemonic social system. Said's pedagogical point – that a theory that arises out of one situation cannot be applied wholesale to another – is made, perhaps too hastily, over the actual resistant nature of theory's passage from one situation to another. This raises an interesting question for regions like the Arab Gulf.

When theory travels it does not, perhaps cannot, displace pre-existing ideas. These are already in place, productive or not. Theory modifies and is modified by them. (Williams' case is exemplary in this regard.) This is what transfer of ideas means. Two sets of theoretical positions always produce a third. Ideally, this third position will be productive within the new conditions of acceptance or resistance rather than simply the dead-end Said warns against. Ideals, however, can be evasions of real conditions. It is to the latter that we must now turn.

Said takes criticism seriously. He is annoyed by careless reading, and would, we might suspect, feel even more exasperated by cases of ill-informed or poorly internalised theory, not only amongst his students but also within the profession. He does not say this. He says only that 'creative misreading' – which appears to be a charitable description of certain rarefied trends in theoretical appropriation (wild reading, reading against the grain, schizo reading, play) – can become the only alternative to 'slavish copying' (236). Much more aggressively, he denounces the (post-modern) idea that 'all interpretations are misinterpretations'. The latter view, he says, devalues the degree to which 'misreading' can be 'a part of the historical transfer of ideas and theory from one setting to another' (236). By 'transfer',

of course, he means scrupulous or careful selection, not wholesale borrowing. In this context, his argument – which is essentially the venerable Marxian one that critics must always historicise – is important. It insists that systems of thought must be not so much carried over into situations where they can have no social and historical resonance as adapted to local conditions of acceptance or resistance, and, indeed, as he says, transformed, by them. This, I would argue, is always the case in the Arab Gulf region, regardless of intention, if only because of basic language barriers – which makes adaptation necessary and unavoidable. Where misreading is ‘uncreative’, the case is far less clear.

A ‘trap’ does occur, but not yet on Said’s terms. This pre-trap, as it were, is not the result of viewing a given theory as total and absolute, always and invariable true; nor is it an uncritical effect of mastery – which assumes that the theory has been understood (‘read’) in the first place (and theory as trap can only arise in that circumstance) – as he implies. Understandably, Said who is writing for an elite Western academic audience, most of whom will have read the theorists he refers to (Lukacs, Goldmann, Williams, Michel Foucault) both in English and French, does not address the basic problem of reading theory in a language less semantically attuned to European ones, or with inadequate tools of comprehension. Nevertheless, for us, it is one which cannot be ignored. It is not only particularly relevant to non-Western, non-Anglophone or non-Francophone settings, but also carries a peculiar pathos in the global circuits of economic, technological or educational dependency.

There are cases of transmission where the critic has not internalised the theory, or has not understood it, or is not able to read much of it. This is indeed an effect of misreading, but misreading in the sense of partial or incomplete reading – which is not the same thing, or not yet the same thing, as ‘creative’ misreading. Nor is it the sort of radical misreading (which is also based on understanding) which allows for a kind of freeing up or channelling of previously withheld or uneasily felt argument which would not otherwise be articulated. By this I mean that mis-appropriations of Euro-American theory can enable the expression of locally produced theory, as reflective (in Said’s sense of Williams’ criticism) or as counter-hegemonic (in Williams’ sense of Gramsci’s theory) or, most enabling of all perhaps, as self-defining and self-analytic, in or outside the dominant tongue. I shall return to this issue later on. But for the moment it is important to address poorly assimilated theory, in order to anticipate fully the conditions for the emergence of successfully appropriated theory on the final leg of its travels.

There are those who aim to learn theory, transport it and then disseminate it in the home environment who may not just have mislaid parts of it on the way but who have simply got it wrong right at the start. Getting it wrong has to do with critical incapacity, for which an uncertain grasp of the language in which theory is read (or not read) is only the most obvious culprit. In the pedagogical context, for a Euro-American theory to successfully pass from a point of origin into the mental hand-luggage of the critic, and thence onto a flight out, and from thence into the minds of auditors, it must, right at the beginning undergo another, less visible transfer, whether from books, lecture notes, seminars or conversation, into the conceptual apparatus of the luggage bearer. In other words, it must undergo a passage from outside to inside, from the external world to the inner perceptual and ideational landscape of the sponsor. This is a tricky business which prefigures the more visible journey Said describes. Theory must negotiate internal conditions of acceptance or resistance, before it can begin to meet those of the environment it is headed for. This is not the same thing as saying that the sponsor's or potential critic's mind must be open to cognitive colonisation; it is simply to say that it must know what it is thinking.

In the home-environment, this pre-trap is most obvious at points of dissemination – classroom, public lectures, published articles. It applies just as much to foreign, West-based or Arabic-speaking expatriates as it does to local teachers. It is only too easy to caricature a situation where internalisation has not occurred: the critic's language is striking for its exhibition of Latinate, Greek or French labels (the base lexa of most theoretical language) which can very quickly substitute for or obliterate sense and mystify its implications. The glamour of language, the glitter of words, replaces meaning and referent. In the academy, already a rigidly hierarchicized institution, the seductions are obvious.

In some hands, highly specialised theoretical terminology is treated as hermetic or sacred, the exclusive preserve of the initiated, to which others may have no access and by whose tractical utterance the initiated gain greater lustre and authority. In others, especially those that write articles, theory's buzzwords are treated as magical objects designed to attract the eye rather than the mind, somehow capable of opening the doors of perception like psychotropic drugs simply by being stuck on the page or by having the reader swallow them whole. The point is that complex terminology, such as, in the fields of cultural analysis, philosophy, psychology, history, sociology, politics and literature, 'phallogocentrism', 'chronotope', 'heteroglossia', 'ideologeme', 'hegemony', 'discourse' or

'deconstruction', will be nothing but glittering insignia or bitter pills that auditors will choke on unless sugared by a critical apparatus sensitive to local resistances. Following on from Said's own rigour in the matter, perhaps it is not too sentimental to suggest that theory's carriers have a duty to their auditors, especially to those for whom the humanities is a vocation, not an exercise in dazzle or horse-medicine, and for whom English is often only a foreign language anyway.

This is not to say that all foreign or local Euro-American trained carriers of theory – routinely identified by the epithet 'Doctor' – are quacks. Theory's carriers, as teachers, will do their best to pass on what they have learned. But they may not have learned it very well; they may not have learned it at all; the wrong ones may be teaching it; the right ones may be resistant to the cultural specificities of the local environment (and so incapable of negotiating meaning via the sensitivities of their auditors); others may be indifferent. In the Arab Gulf countries, local teachers may be victims (and, in another sense, of course, beneficiaries) of the limitations of scholarship programmes to the Euro-American academy. This allied to systemic negligence or cupidity elsewhere, can only have a disabling effect on the transmission of comparative knowledges in the home environment.

On the one hand, crucially in the prestigious Euro-American academy, there may be summary or watered-down teaching and supervision (particularly in doctoral courses of study), as a result of first language/second-language assumptions, funding inducements and inter-government policy. On the other hand, home-grown scholarship programmes may be tilted in favour of privileged social groupings – so that individual merit is not, in itself, a guarantee of academic advancement – and those who enter these programmes are likely only to vitiate an already impoverished and impoverishing system of knowledge-transmission. Embedded cultural presumptions and expectations may exacerbate the situation still further. For example, in places where a career move is seen as an elevation in social status, rather than a vocational reinforcement, a doctorate becomes not so much a marker of knowledge-attainment, knowledge-production and knowledge-transmission as an entitlement. Much of this, as I have indicated, is an effect of unstated or masked cross-cultural socio-economic arrangements (as glossed by the phrase 'bi-lateral relations', in the glib jargon of international diplomacy), as well as local pre-determinants, not of luck or some individual lack of scruple.

There are, of course, other circumstances that bear on the transmission of theory. One of these concerns its so-called 'difficulty', which can disarm even the most fluent of English and French readers.

Often, as Said observes, Euro-American theoretical language reproduces the sorts of 'eccentricity' found in the literature it might otherwise aim to illuminate. This is why it cannot properly travel without an accompanying party of what might be called secondary sponsors – in the form of commentary or explication. Few people, even those who read French, can begin to understand Jacques Lacan's dense prose without a Bruce Fink or a Routledge Reader to hand. Yet these, along with the primary texts, are mostly missing from local libraries and book-stories.

When theory travels via the intermediary of a book of translation, it may be so censored or mistranslated as to remain unreadable or unintelligible.⁹ In Arabic-speaking regions, this has been the case with much of the work produced by Euro-American theorists over the last few decades or more.¹⁰ Much of it has not even been translated.¹¹ That which has, and does not suffer from traduction or piecemeal editing, is available only in out-dated or out-of-print editions. At the same time, as mentioned, local theory, whether produced in response to travelling theory or local pressures, may be either censored out of existence or reduced to poorly transcribed and desultory *samizdat*. In Arab Gulf countries, it is no exaggeration to say that students of the humanities and the social sciences often receive only fragmentary impressions or garbled comment – if, that is, they receive anything at all.

All this effectively muffles those who actually aim to nourish others with Said's cultural and intellectual sustenance. It is especially disabling to those who have gone to the Euro-American academy in search of knowledge rather than a leg-up. And perhaps more damaging, for the cultural and intellectual well-being of the home environment, is the gloomy fact that those who can survive what is, in every sense, a 'dumbing down' process – that is, the best scholars and teachers – often become enculturated to the host culture. They do not return. The same applies to those who, through mishandling or neglect, allied to recognition (and its attractions) elsewhere, decamp. On the one hand, as cultiuralists like to point out, they buy into a system that has already bought them; on the other, as pragmatists say, they go where they can work best and where their work will be best appreciated and rewarded. They become 'post-colonial intellectuals'.

Conditions of Acceptance

Said's third prescription is the most troubling one, although not for the reason he gives. This is the 'set of conditions – call them conditions of acceptance or, as inevitable part of acceptance, resistances – which then confronts the transplanted theory or idea, making possible its introduction or toleration, however alien it might appear to be'. For Said, resistance to theory necessitates what he calls, following Lukacs, 'critical consciousness'

(as opposed to Lukacs' 'class consciousness') – the ability not merely to reproduce but to interrogate and adapt according to local conditions. He puts it like this: 'critical consciousness is awareness of the differences between situations, awareness too of the fact that no system or theory exhausts the situation out of which it emerges or to which it is transported' (242).

Here we might note that Said has (with a gracefully deceptive logic) obeyed his own prescription, not only by transforming Lukacs' 'class consciousness' but by borrowing (suitably modified) Williams' idea that no social system – now bracketed with theory itself – can exhaust a situation. (The logical *reductio*, we can further note, is that this notion of totalising grand theory must be, in itself, subject to the same imperative – of historicisation – as any other travelling theory.¹²) But Said departs company with both Lukacs and Williams by dropping class from the critical apparatus of analysis and by eliding the emergent (as alternative or oppositional) with the putatively totalising theory itself. These 'misreadings' are significant, for they help explain why his argument seems so Eurocentric and elitist to some critics, in the route it takes. After all, class, as a critical tool, would take his criticism into less privileged places than the Sorbonne or Cambridge, while emergent acts or intentions, which are not limited to a dominant group but take into account subordinate or marginal social formations, would push it out towards other parts of the world altogether – surely a more fitting direction for the author of *Orientalism*. But this, it seems, is not (in this essay) what Said is after.¹³

For Said, the critic's job is to 'provide resistances to theory, to open it up toward historical reality, toward society, toward human needs and interests, to point up those concrete instances drawn from everyday reality that lie outside or just beyond the interpretive area necessarily designated in advance and thereafter circumscribed by every theory' (242). Whether or not Said's 'human needs and interests' refers only to those of Euro-American scholars, his language suggests a kind of ripple-effect, theory replacing theory in ever-widening orbits of totality, as resistances expose areas as yet uncovered. Perhaps this is unintended, for Said's overall argument leans towards a less holistic or less enclosing model of interpretation, and one which intersects with others, each ripple of interpretation – not unlike Yuri M. Lotman's 'semiospheres'¹⁴ – granting space for that which is always (potentially) emergent, interrogatory, contradictory, or, to use his own word, resistant. As in Lotman's semiospheres, different types and orders of meaning-production, including those of class and alternative acts and intentions, are implicit in the call to

open up theory to society and everyday reality which, the later Said would surely agree, excludes no one and no place. The issue of who resists – the privileged Archimedean critic of Euro-American location or the local critic – all but vanishes into this larger and, for us, more engaging problematic.

Resistance is the key-term. The critic's job is not to apply the theory willy-nilly but to criticise it, to take it apart, to translate it in ways that make sense under local conditions, to modify it radically, if need be, if these conditions prove hostile or intractable; his or her task is to make it work in the local context – while, at the same time, remaining faithful to the conceptual investments of the original. Although Said may not have been writing for an Arabic-speaking audience, or a non-Anglophone one, Arabic-speaking readers will certainly appreciate the value of these injunctions, when they remember the early Arabic commentaries on (and transformations of) Greek theory and the latter's subsequent multi-faceted and multi-lingual dispersal.¹⁵

Said's fourth point is phrased as a virtual fait accompli: 'the now fully (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated) idea is to some extent transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place'. Critical consciousness does the job of transformation. Or does it?

To answer this, it is, I think, necessary to unpack the baggage of that travel metaphor once more, to see if anything else might have been forgotten at the beginning of the journey. Said's argument, as noted, is concerned with a very limited geography. It does not take account of theory which travels more widely or along less linear routes than that of Lukacs' ideas on 'reification-and-totality'. Nor does it remember that particular critics in particular situations have particular agenda – though this is implicit in Said's analysis of the uses to which his theorists put it. Some theory is simply not high on the list of priorities of critics in any one place at any one time. Said's travel itinerary ignores the crucial fact that space is demarcated by actual borders – national, economic, social and cultural, as well as intellectual.

To take account of this, a better term than the somewhat over-burdened 'critic' may be called for. For this purpose, and mindful of the realities of travel in the Arab Gulf states, I prefer, as I have already indicated, critical sponsors. Theory can neither arrive nor survive without sponsors. They are, as the word suggests, responsible for its welfare. They are not only intermediaries between it and the local conditions of acceptance or resistance but also the purveyors of its social, political, aesthetic and pedagogic import. Their first task is to make sure it carries the right type of passport.

As another respondent to Said's travelling theory has pointed out, one

difficulty facing the migration of theory, from the place and time where it was produced to other places and times is that passports contain built-in restrictions; one type of passport may allow the bearer to pass unimpeded into one space while another may not.¹⁶ Passports exist to control movements, not to liberate them. Thus sponsorship may be restricted to a particular kind of theory – to one, that is, that abides by the conditions of entry a particular state or region imposes. These may be very different from the conditions of acceptance or resistance among the communities beyond the Arrivals hall.

Not so long ago, psychoanalysis – arguably among the three most influential of theories coming out of modern Europe's centres of theory-production – was proscribed by Soviet state-governments. Before 1989, in Czechoslovakia, for example, it was seen as a 'bourgeois individualistic' phenomenon, obstructive to the workers' 'historical destiny of building a class-less society', and none of the works of Freud or his followers were released by the state-controlled publishing-houses.¹⁷ By the same token, Marxism, a second modern theory par excellence, has undergone a much more troublesome passage to certain parts of the world than Said's account of Lukacs' version's travels across Europe would suggest. Indeed, the orthodox version is still forbidden entry to some equally censorious (if ideologically quite distinct) regions as pre-1989 Czechoslovakia. Similarly, Darwinian evolutionism, perhaps the third of modernity's master-theories, is still refused entry by many countries, and is even currently being interned in certain states of the so-called free world, for much the same reasons.

If some theory cannot even begin to travel to certain places, others can only do so with a forged passport or by being smuggled across the border in the wrong clothes. The risk here is not just of misrepresentation but also of travesty. The conceptual apparatus of theory requires a special tact at the best of times. It is not much good taking a concept-metaphor like 'surveillance' and applying it to anything that smacks of censorship or state control, without first interrogating its use in Foucault's work, observing its limitations, and testing how far it can apply outside the nineteenth-century Europe and France of prisons, schools and asylums. The same goes for 'interpellation; and 'hegemony'. These have precise provenances, referring to the post-Freudian construction of subjectivity and the activities of the state in the delineation of a 'subject', in the first case, and classical accounts of circumscribing power in the second (Gramsci's modern usage introduces another historical and geographical limitation: southern Italian labour movements as consensual contributors to northern Italian

governance in the 1930s, a relational approach to power, not, as in the older classical sense, a simple imposition from above).

The critical sponsor who applies these ideas to other contexts, subject to other histories and cultural constraints, must shave them of their provincial European affiliations, and polish them up for new ones, not uproot them and plonk them down, as raw and bleeding universal givens, on the desks of students or the pages of local journals. In these circumstances, theory is not 'fully (or partly) accommodated (or incorporated)', as Said anticipates, still less 'transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place'. It nourishes and sustains no one. It is simply thrown up, leaving only stink of someone else's poor digestion.

A few broader conceptual examples will underline the point. In literature, Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque responds to social streamlining and regimentation in Stalinist USSR, finding grounds in traditional folk festivals for ideas about generative or creative energies in the context of as stultified and coercive state apparatuses. Similarly, polyphony, at Bakhtin theorised it, aims to account for embedded or marginal voices within dominant systems of representation, not to describe de-historicised or transcendent artistic expressions. Neither of these ideas can be understood as ahistorical aesthetic principles – and the aesthetic, likewise, cannot be easily shorn of its historical and geographical roots, as one travelling theorist reminded Kuwait University at a recent conference.¹⁸

In psychoanalysis, Lacan's idea that the unconscious is structured like a language responds to a specific revisionism within the Anglo-American psychoanalytic practise of the 1950s (which Lacan saw as vulgarising Freud's work on language, in favour of a simplistic and damaging one-to-one symbolic hermeneutics) and is inflected with the structural approach to language of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson. (The unconscious, one might also note, is not in itself as widely travelled a concept as some would think.) Similarly, in philosophy, Jacques Derrida's work on *différance* – or the so-called sliding signifier – which also makes use of Saussure, and which aims to counter what Derrida saw as an expansive self-fulfilling metaphysics, arose out of the dissatisfactions of that generation who had grown up in the aftermath of a devastating World War which seemed to make all such self-present systems of signification (grand narratives) redundant or misleading and even malign. (Post-modernism, it has been argued, is a specific European response to the sort of historical understanding which produced the worst excesses of that war.) By the same token, in gender studies, Judith Butler's work on performative gender and identity in modern culture (meaning mainstream middle-class white North American culture), or, in cultural studies, bell

arab journal for the humanities

220

Issue 84 / 21

The best of theory is worth engaging with because it can illuminate and thus, in some way, allow us to see things differently. If Said's essay has relevance for us it is because he chose to focus on the intellectual and cultural life theory helps sustain and even propagate on its travels. That his record of those travels warns chiefly of the dangers of foreclosure and banality should not blind us to what theory, properly modified for the home environment, can help accomplish at journey's end.

REFERENCES

1. Edward W. Said, 'Traveling Theory', in *The World, The Text, and The Critic* (Vintage, London: 1991). All further references are to this edition. The essay, in its present form, was first published in 1983.
2. See, for example, Aijaz Ahmad, in *In Theory* (Verso, New York and London: 1994), who has to tie his materialist conception of theory – 'theory is ... a necessary relation between facts and their explanations' (34) – to literary texts. Similarly, the authors of *Post-Theory: New Directions in Criticism*, edited by Martin McQuillan et al (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, Scotland: 1999), attempting to shake up critical theory – re-reading Marx, Freud, Bourdieu, Derrida – are unable to shake off the legacy of its grounding in literary analysis. The last section, 'The Post-Theory Condition' re-reads Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett and the classical tradition of English Studies.
3. See especially *What's Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, edited by Judith Butler, John Guillory and Kendall Thomas (Routledge, New York and London: 2000).
4. James L. Clifford, 'Notes on Travel and Theory', *Inscriptions*, vol 5, 1989 http://humwww.uses.edu/DivWeb/CultStudies/PUBS/Inscriptions/vol_5/clifford.html
5. It is as well to bear in mind that this definition owes much to Clifford's pluralist credentials within North American cultural studies. It is perhaps coloured, therefore, with the implications of American multiculturalism as it is played out in the context of identity politics and ethnic reductionism – as a kind of centrist patronage, cultural relativity re-written for the new world order. See Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (Verso: London and New York, 2000, pps. 171-244).
6. Examples of such work include Sadia Jallal Al-Azim's *Al-Istisharaq wa Al-Istisharaq Makusan* (Orientalism and orientalism reversed) (Riad Najib Ar-Rayes, London: 1992) and Hazim Saqbia's *Thaqafat Al-Khomeiniya: Mawqif min Al-Istisharaq am Harb alla Taif* (Cultures of Khomeinism: an attitude of orientalism or a war on spectra) (Dar Al-Jadeed, lowers case only Beirut: 1995).
7. Research papers support their arguments with data based on Euro-American empirical models, but make little or no attempt to interrogate the cultural or political assumptions that motivate these. This is most evident in the language that is carried over with the models. What does it mean to say, here in Kuwait, that mothers are 'care-givers', or people who use narcotics are 'drug-abusers', or that men who beat women are 'abusive', or that young people who lock themselves away in dark rooms are 'alienated'? The meaning of a word is indissoluble from its history (its paleonymy), which involves the story of its passage from one cultural context to another.
8. See *The Long Revolution* (1960) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Said overlooks the extent to which Williams' adaptations of Goldmann and Lukacs are consonant with his own earlier responses to other versions of Marxist thought. 'Structures of feeling' – not

mentioned by Said – travels through the encounter with Goldmann to help in Williams' project of accounting for resistances, which, after all, are not only calculated but felt (often against the grain of calculus), within dominant ideologies.

9. Censorship plays a crucial role in the translation process. For example, Erich Fromm's To Have or To Be which was translated by the National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Kuwait, in 1989, has a chapter (on the Bible's Old and New Testaments) missing. Bowdlerisation or abrupt and careless editing characterise other translations. For example, Christopher Norris' Deconstruction: Theory and Practice, which has been translated in Saudi Arabia and Syria, suffers from omissions of many pages, reversed paragraphing, and, in one case, the excision of Norris' introduction. Other theoretical work may be represented only by secondary material, as, for example, an anthology of writings on Lacan published by the Higher Council of Culture in Egypt, Cairo, in 1999.
10. The impoverishment does not end there. In Covering Islam, Said makes the startling claim that local students and scholars are 'dependent upon American and European libraries and institutions of learning for what now passes as Middle East studies'. He adds, parenthetically, that 'not one really complete and central library of Arabic material exists anywhere in the entire Islamic world' (1996: 56).
11. A rough sample. None of the works by, in no particular order, Walter Benjamin, Jacques Lacan, Judith Butler, Jean Baudrillard, Karl Jaspers, Louis Althusser, Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Julia Kristeva, Emmanuel Levinas, Luce Trigaray, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Frederic Jameson, Ihab Hassan, Donna Haraway, Melanie Klein or Edmund Husserl have ever been translated into Arabic. Roland Barthes, Paul Ricoeur, Jean-François Lyotard, Georg Lukacs, Herbert Marcuse, Hans Gadamer and Claude Lévi-Strauss are each represented by only one book. Jacques Derrida is represented by two and Friedrich Nietzsche three. Of the three leading thinkers of the modern period, only Karl Marx's Capital has been translated (in the 1980s), only Charles Darwin's The Origin of the Species has been translated (in the 1940s), while only a sample of Freud's corpus has been translated (by George Tarabishi in Lebanon).
12. Said, of course, was writing at the height of the Cold War, when Soviet-style totalitarian rule had reached its zenith. This might explain why class, as a critical tool, remains an object of suspicion in his work.
13. Later, he will try to make up for this. To some extent, Culture and Imperialism (Chatto and Windus: London, 1995) redresses the balance.
14. See Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture, translated by Ann Shukman (I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd.: London and New York, 1990).
15. I am only repeating a cliché. More recent examples of successful theoretical aporopriations, such as those of Fatima Mernissi, Leila Ahmed, Abdullah Qassimi, Mohammed Arkoun, Mohammed El-Jabri, Hasan Hanafi, Adonis, Nawaal El-Saadawi, Nasser Hamid Abu Zaid, Abdurrahman Badawi and Mahdi Amil will be perhaps less easily remembered, if only for the lack of official promotion.
16. Jirzina Semjkalova, On the Road: Smuggling Feminism Across the Post-Iron Curtain. <http://www.c3.hu/scripta/replika/english/01/10fsmej.htm>
17. Semjkalova, as above.
18. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Kuwait University, March, 2001.