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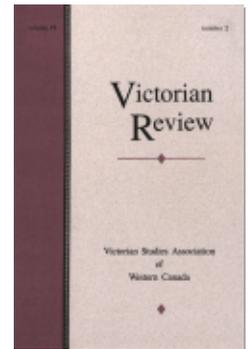
*Culture and Imperialism* by Edward W. Said (review)

Audrey A. Fisch

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one that can also point Gatrell in an interesting direction for the future. The final chapter, "From the White Sea to Cape Horn"; Thomas Hardy and the Wider World," raises difficult questions about Hardy's persistent regionalism in the face of England's great insecurity about its international role — an insecurity that is voiced in different ways by Gissing, Conrad, Forster, and other English novelists. But in Gatrell's eagerness to present Hardy as cosmopolitan, he makes the mistake of taking Hardy's claims to "universality" to mean that he was globally aware:

. . . Part of my argument . . . is that where Meredith continually imagines his essentially English actions within a European framework, and where Conrad's English protagonists find their identities modified or reinforced in a colonial context, Hardy is anxious for his readers to be constantly aware of the global, even the universal (in a literal as well as a figurative sense) significance of his deliberately circumscribed actions. (175)

This non-ironic use of the term "universal" reveals Gatrell's essentialist bias, and Gatrell's willingness to take the role of Hardy apologist further disables the conclusions in this chapter. A more interesting project for Gatrell might be to interrogate or problematize Hardy's regionalism instead of defending it, and in the course of the investigation he could integrate his thoughts about community and environment in Hardy's novels.

Simon Gatrell's strength is in his close textual scholarship on Hardy, and he brings that depth to *Thomas Hardy and the Proper Study of Mankind*. Perhaps, though, his next project will take a more critical stance and develop more focus and definition.

LAUREN MCKINNEY  
Temple University

Edward W. Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Knopf, 1993. xxviii + 380. \$24.00 U.S.

The crystallization of "some ideas about the general relationship between culture and empire" (xi), *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said's latest foray into "the processes of imperialism" (12), investigates

“a general world-wide pattern of imperial culture” and “a historical experience of resistance against empire” (xii). Centered around Victorian literature and Victorian society, but also voyaging well beyond that area and period into contemporary American society and global post-colonial politics, Said’s study locates the struggles of empire and imperialism at the heart of culture. He argues for a consideration and re-contextualization of imperialism and its underpinnings in all cultural texts, whether they contain only the “shadowy presence” (xvi) of empire found in many early and mid-nineteenth century texts or whether they focus on empire as “a central area of concern” (xvii) as do many writers of the late-nineteenth century and beyond. Said’s is an argument that goes to the center of debates about the curriculum, about political correctness, and about multiculturalism, but it is also an immensely moderate call: to read literary texts while attuned to the historical and political context of imperialism that today’s post-colonial society, with its cacophony of previously marginalized voices, makes newly visible. But there are difficulties in the project: first, Said’s unwieldy and contradictory notion and treatment of “culture,” and second, his unwillingness to tackle the question of causality between culture and imperialism.

Said describes his notion of “culture” as “those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure” (xii). In other words, Said wants to hold onto the idea of the “relative autonomy” of culture and of the aesthetics of culture from the political fray. At the same time, Said concedes half-heartedly that “culture is a sort of theater where various political and ideological causes engage on another” (xiii), that “culture can even be a battleground” (xiii). That Said dreams of a world in which culture is neither a battleground nor a theater, where culture is fully autonomous from the economic, social, and political realms, is clear.

Said’s own personal aesthetics often pretend to partake of this world of autonomous culture, not of today’s cultural battleground. For example, Said writes “that some literature is actually good, and that some is bad” and speaks in rather clichéd tones of “if not the redemptive value of reading a classic rather than staring at a television screen, then the potential enhancement of one’s sensibility and consciousness by doing so, by the exercise of one’s mind” (319). In a reference to C.L.R. James, “whose early formation in British colonial schools brought forth a wonderful appreciation of English culture as well as serious disagreements with it” (245), Said inasmuch as reveals his own attitude to “the classics” as a “wonderful appreciation of English culture.” This nebulous (and colonial?) aesthetics of

appreciation structures Said's study through his choices of texts and authors for analysis (by and large male canonical "classics" — Conrad, Austen, Dickens, Camus, Kipling, Yeats, etc.). Said underlines this aesthetic basis for his work: "The novels and other books I consider here I analyze because *first of all* I find them estimable and admirable works of art and learning, in which I and many other readers take pleasure" (emphasis added, xiv) and "My method is to focus as much as possible on individual works, to read them *first* as great products of the creative or interpretive imagination" (emphasis added, xxii).

But this same aesthetics — the beauty of English culture, the admirableness of British art and learning, and the creativity of British minds — is and was thoroughly bound up in the political processes of imperialism (among other politics). Said notes the work of Gauri Viswanathan, whose *The Masks of Conquest*, locates the political origins of the discipline of modern English studies in the system of colonial education in India. But his praise for Viswanathan's work, which Said notes "maps out a varied and intertwined archeology of knowledge [about] what we study as literature, history, culture, and philosophy [with "vast implications" for] polemics on the superiority of Western over non-Western models" (42), seems not to have led Said to question his own "archeology of knowledge" and the colonial formation of his own aesthetics. The fact that culture is a political battleground neither dissuades Said from unironically labelling Kipling's *Kim* "a work of great aesthetic merit" (150) nor informs his choice of texts.

While maintaining the charge of the beauty and aesthetic power of the "classic" texts under his examination, Said does insist on reading and appreciating these texts differently, on placing these texts in their "full political context, a context that is primarily imperial" (57). In this context, Said finds it "genuinely troubling to see how little Britain's great humanistic ideas, institutions, and monuments, which we still celebrate today as having the power ahistorically to command our approval, how little they stand in the way of the accelerating imperial process. We are entitled to ask how this body of humanistic ideas co-existed so comfortably with imperialism" (82). Unwilling to question whether Britain's great ideas and monuments, at least within the institution of literature, ought to be "celebrated" at all, Said here is also unwilling to entertain the more difficult question of how this body of ideas, not just passively co-existed with imperialism, but actively contributed to it. This unwillingness to examine the active relation between culture and imperialism, paraded throughout the book as an unwillingness "to blame" individual great authors, stems from Said's discomfort with or denial of the agency of literature. He writes, for example, that "cultural forms like the novel or the opera do not cause

people to go out and imperialize — Carlyle did not drive Rhodes directly, and he certainly cannot be ‘blamed’ for the problems in today’s southern Africa” (82), that “A novel is neither a frigate nor a bank draft” (73), and that “Today’s critic cannot and should not suddenly give a novel legislative or direct political authority” (75). Of the political power of culture, Said concedes only that “novels participate in, are part of, contribute to an extremely slow, infinitesimal politics that clarifies, reinforces, perhaps even occasionally advances perceptions and attitudes” (75). Stacking the odds against the agency of literature, by comparing it to “legislative or direct political authority” or describing it as “an extremely slow, infinitesimal politics,” Said here ends up belittling the importance of the politics of representation and tip-toeing around questions of political responsibility and effect (against the claims of his own lifetime of work). Troubles in southern Africa might indeed be traced, through careful cultural and historical analysis, to Rhodes and Carlyle. A novel, like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, to name one of many examples, can exert direct political power in ways not dissimilar in force from a frigate or a bank draft. And finally, the fact that cultural texts exert their influences slowly on perceptions and attitudes still makes the study of such texts important, even crucial.

As Said writes, “we are only at the stage of trying to inventory the *interpellation* of culture by empire, but the efforts so far made are only slightly more than rudimentary. And as the study of culture extends into the mass media, popular culture, micro-politics, and so forth, the focus on modes of power and hegemony grows sharper” (61). Looking beyond high canonical literary figures and looking at all texts as social presences, with particular audiences, historical receptions, as well as historical and literary contexts, the politics of culture and cultural events become more and more clear. Said’s insistence on the imperialism within and beyond nineteenth-century high and low culture is important. Answers to the more difficult questions of the causal relation between culture and imperialism, like the questions of the relation between culture and the politics of gender, class, race, and sexuality, will most likely take the form, over the next intellectual generation, of particular answers to particular cultural texts and historical and political events.

AUDREY A. FISCH  
Jersey City State College