

WORKING AND WRITING FOR TOMORROW
ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF ITALA VIVAN

edited by
Annalisa Oboe
Claudia Gualtieri
and
Roger Bromley



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PREFACE

Annalisa Oboe and Claudia Gualtieri

The rationale behind this book is provided by the Saidian notion of the *intellectual* as a cultural interpreter, a political activist, and a traveller through place and time. As the title suggests, we believe that being an academic today entails *working* in the ethical/political field of education and *writing* (intended as producing and disseminating knowledge) with the sense of being in the world—of being “wordly”—and having a project for tomorrow in mind: a future of dialogic encounters, critical awareness, and mutual understanding.

In *Representations of the Intellectual*, Edward Said draws on Antonio Gramsci’s notion of the “organic intellectual” as an expression of the emergence of a new class in specific historical contingencies, and as a specialised representative of the consequent social and cultural productions. Said further elaborates on the intellectuals’ active engagement in social, economic, and ethical actions and discourses, and argues that, “today, everyone who works in any field connected with the production or distribution of knowledge is an intellectual in Gramsci’s sense” (7). This type of intellectual negotiates with “traditional” intellectuals, and also mediates with other unrepresented social categories that operate at the level of ordinary life and culture. Following these suggestions, Said considers the dilemmas and predicaments that modern independent intellectuals face, as they disentangle themselves from the pressure of mass politics, from pessimistic conjectures about their apparent marginality in national culture making, from the lure of power, and the temptation of prestige. Only critical interrogation, resistance to any form of domination, and adherence to truth should inspire independent intellectuals as they struggle to interpret and expose the dynamics of their time. Said, by quoting from the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, offers a summary of the independent thinker’s task, as he also understands it:

The independent artist and intellectual are among the few remaining personalities equipped to resist and to fight the stereotyping and consequent death of genuinely living things. Fresh perception now involves the capacity to continually unmask and to smash the stereotypes of vision and intellect with which modern communication [i.e. modern systems of representation] swamp us. These worlds of mass-art and mass-thought are increasingly geared to the demands of politics. That is why it is in politics that intellectual solidarity and effort must be centered. If the thinker does not relate himself to the value of truth in political struggle, he cannot responsibly cope with the whole of life experience. (Said 1994, 16)

In much the same way as everyday ordinary culture is the operating field of independent intellectuals, language is their privileged tool, as struggles over power and knowledge are at times manifest and, at times, veiled in and through language. To unmask the rhetoric of power and Manichean representations of the world, intellectuals must keep critical alertness in order to question stereotyped interpretations and easy assumptions (for example in nationalist discourses). In Said's view, which is endorsed here, intellectuals are presented as individuals who need to solve personal and private negotiations within their public roles. Therefore their aptitude is central to their wordly performance: "My argument is that intellectuals are individual with a vocation for the art of representing, whether that is talking, writing, teaching, appearing on television. And that vocation is important to the extent that it involves both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability" (10). This inclination is actively staged in concrete conditions and situations along the convergent lines of loyalty to their ethical function and faith in speaking the truth, intentionally addressing "the constituted and authorised powers of one's own society" (72). The difficult compromise and subtle balance between personal and collective drives is played out and achieved in the public arena through an active engagement with the other: through encounters.

The key notion of *encounter*—physical, intellectual, cultural—necessarily permeates the intellectual's interest in socio-cultural phenomena and transformations, and also informs the work of this volume's contributors. In his definition of the intellectual in *L'homme dépaycé*, Tzvetan Todorov explores the relations between liberty and power, liberty and responsibility, and focuses on the influences of culture, languages, traditions, beliefs, and meanings with which a person has grown up. The path he devises for intellectuals, who inevitably shuttle between the personal and the collective and necessarily operate from within social and cultural constraints, is to try and displace themselves so as to open up routes that lead to the encounter with the other. This entails constant confrontation, but also steady and possibly utopian working towards ethical freedom.

The intellectual's objective, in the way we understand it in the light of these ideas, is that of working for a better world. In the specific situation, the intellectual is called on to keep a rigorously coherent position, as Said maintains, for "the goal of speaking the truth is, in so administered a mass society as ours, mainly to project a better state of affairs and one that corresponds more closely to a set of moral principles—peace, reconciliation, abatement of suffering—applied to known facts" (Said 1994, 72). Active involvement in the present, therefore, must also move beyond factuality and look ideally towards the future. Drawing insight from the struggles of liberation of black movements and from their inspiring principles, as theorised by Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire for example, new human beings should be invented for the future. This future project is expressed by Said when focusing on the intellectuals' imperatives, "which are always to go beyond survival to questions of political liberation, to critiques of the

Preface

leadership, to presenting alternatives that are too often marginalised or pushed aside as irrelevant to the main battle at hand” (30). Dialogic encounters are useful key steps along the difficult, though rewarding path to mutual understanding.

The present volume shares in and wishes to promote this spirit through its many voices. The collection offers essays in the scientific and academic fields of cultural and literary studies by scholars from Europe, Africa and North America. The contributions are clustered around English, Black-British, North-American, Caribbean, and African literatures and cultures, and post-colonial theory and writing, and the main temporal focus is on the present. The essays are variously concerned with the *here* and *now*, as they analyse complex representations of culture in specific geographic and historical contexts. Special attention to ongoing processes of identity formation and to power relations between hegemonic and marginal discourses and positions is found throughout the collection, so that interesting reading paths across cultural borders can be followed. The book also includes a section in which colleagues and friends celebrate, each in their own personal way, their relationship with the person to whom the book is dedicated.

Each essay reveals the positionality of the author, his/her academic and cultural affiliations, and the material landscape of his/her location—places that tell the story of significant personal and cultural encounters. Each contribution is therefore also a step in the routes this ideal community of intellectuals has travelled along. The staged encounters, with their academic and biographical suggestions, public and private discourses, forge a story which assembles standpoints of intellectual life with fragments of memoirs, visited places, people encountered, traditions shared, words exchanged, and projects realised.

This volume is offered as a festschrift on the occasion of Itala Vivan’s retirement from her position as Professor of English Literature and Post-colonial and Cultural Studies at the University of Milan. Itala grew up intellectually in Italy and in the United States, where she specialised in and taught Comparative Literatures. She then worked as a cultural attaché at the Istituto Italiano di Cultura in London, and went back to Italy in the late 1970s to teach English and postcolonial literatures and cultures at the Universities of Bari, Verona, and Milan. She is widely known as a specialist in South African writing, culture, and politics. She pioneered the study of African literatures in the Italian academy, and more recently promoted the field of cultural and Black British studies. Itala is still active in teaching, writing, organising events, giving papers, encouraging new publications, and collaborating with former students and colleagues.

With this book we wish to celebrate her work and writing, and express the gratefulness that goes along with our privileged encounter with both.

April 2008

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