

# Endurance

## Intellectual Work Meets the Academic Institution

JANE DAWSON  
*St. Francis Xavier University*

[Let us] ask what we can do to reclaim our voices as agents of change and promoters of critique and dissent.<sup>1</sup>

### Beset

CAROLINE ALEXANDER'S (1998) account of Sir Ernest Shackleton's legendary Antarctic expedition in the ship *Endurance* describes a nine-month period where heavy floes of pack ice surround and immobilize the vessel. Trapped and stranded, the ship is pinioned by the immense pressure of the constantly moving ice, which threatens to crush and sink it at any moment. Alexander names this period of the expedition with the single word, "beset." It is a good word to describe such stuckness, conveying a firm no-nonsense note of embattlement, besieged on all sides, with no escape routes possible. Webster dictionary (Porter, 1913) reveals that there are further meanings of the word as well: Perplexed; harassed; waylaid with obstacles, ills, and troubles. In short, it covers all manner of tight spots and heavy weather.

It is a term that has occurred to me frequently over the past few years, as I have negotiated the pressures and burdens of my first few years in a tenure-track position at a small, liberal arts university in eastern Canada. It's not that I've had a particularly rough time of it, compared to those in other academic localities and more burdensome walks of life. And it's certainly not that my experiences of travail have been anything like the wretched yet valiant struggles of Shackleton and his men as they fought to survive 18 long months of extreme weather and life-threatening circumstance in the uncompromising austral seas. My claims to besetness are far more mundane. They pertain more to the feelings of dissatisfaction, disappointment, uncertainty, anger, and sadness that occasionally flare up when I think of the felt gap between the deepest hope for my life and the actual shape of it—between the yearning and aspirations that drew me towards the work of intellectual scholarship on the one hand and the messier realities of the contemporary academic workplace on the other. As Katherine Kraft (1995) describes, about

similar experiences in the very different vocational context of monastic life, “something is off-kilter, even painfully so, like a persistent, if not always acute awareness of a stone in your shoe or braids that are too tight” (p. 335).

I suppose, like many others, I was drawn to academic work out of a certain ideal of the nature and importance of critical intellectual inquiry. I teach in the academic discipline of adult education, which has a long historical affiliation with radical action for social change. I had occasion recently to try to put my philosophical ideal of critical inquiry into words, in the form of a Statement of Practice articulating my core values as an adult educator. Among other things, in this statement, I define the nature of intellectual work as involving a commitment to open and honest scrutiny of received opinion. I state that I am dedicated to a pedagogical approach that encourages students to venture “both independently and collaboratively into the uncharted space of questioning assumptions, posing questions, tolerating uncertainties, and probing complexities.” I was proud of my Statement of Practice when I wrote it and still have a soft spot for the values conveyed. I could probably tweak the syntax into more elegant form, but it comes close enough to stating what I actually do believe about the importance of critical pedagogy, adopting an educational approach that encourages students to ask hard, critical questions rather than to simply toe the line, learn the formula, and do what they are told.

But hang on. Let’s step back a few paces to look at how I came to be writing this statement in the first place and the conditions under which I was writing it. I wrote it, truth be told, because it was required of me. I wrote it to put in my dossier for my annual performance evaluation, part and parcel of the process involved in preparing for tenure review. I wrote it, in other words, as an act of compliance with institutional authority without so much as a query or quibble (at least not in public) about the entrenched values and assumptions, and the sometimes exasperating power politics, that inevitably seem to go along with this process. The aim of the task is valid enough, to give a supported account of what you’ve got to show for yourself after a period of time on the job. But the steps involved are tedious and time-consuming, as anybody who has gone through them will readily attest. Also, the unquestioned emphasis is on conformity, looking good, and striving to represent yourself according to standards and criteria which leave little scope to question. It’s not that obedience to the process in itself is so terribly unjust, it’s simply that it is so out of harmony with the questioning and challenging that is central to the ideal of critical inquiry. So even though I wrote my practice statement as honestly as I could, I wrote it late at night, in a grudging spirit, under pressure to meet a looming deadline. I wrote it at the expense of other things closer to the heart that I would rather have been working on, that always seem nearly impossible to get around to, in the face of the proliferating, and sometimes crazy-making institutional deadlines and demands requiring prior—and unusually uncritical—attention.

As an instance of besetness this is admittedly small potatoes. However, it gives a general flavor of the kinds of cross-currents I often find myself in the midst of, in the course of an average academic day, articulating one set of values but operating, it often feels, according to another. What is that *grinding* noise? There is a steady low-grade note of discord sounding in the back of things, as if the interests I came to serve and those I am required to obey, keep rubbing against each other like huge slabs of shifting ice or gears out of alignment. Great moments sometimes happen, certainly. The work *is* undoubtedly privileged and frequently rewarding. However, the routine things expected of me as an entry-level toiler within the academic hierarchy, and the more exalted values of intellectual inquiry that drew me to the work in the first place, often pull in wrenchingly different directions. It’s the usual litany of tenure-track woes—performance review, class lists and grading rubrics, publish or perish, the “living parliamentary death”

(Russo, 1997, p. 281) of faculty and committee meetings, increasing accountability to corporate-sounding productivity and output measures—versus the elusive “snow leopard” of critical insight that comes indirectly, “sneaking in endwise, engaging us often where we least expect it” (Lane, 1998, p. 81). How to stay alive to the latter, while running hard simply to keep from getting overwhelmed by the former? For me, this—mostly silent and solitary—struggle is what leads to the tight braids and stone-in-shoe feeling that Kraft so poignantly speaks of. To say again, it is a far cry from being trapped in a frigid sea of pack ice under heavy compression from all sides. But sometimes I wake up late at night overwhelmed with a sense of being ground down and worn away by all the busy-ness and necessary compromises, longing for even a little space in which to probe the wilder and deeper questions of morality and meaning that—at least in my Statement of Practice—I am so committed to encouraging my students to explore. There are contradictions and contrary obligations at every turn. It’s no epic Endurance saga, to be sure. But in those late-night moments of restlessness and daily striving to reconcile assertions of rebellion with acts of compliance, the analogy of the ship wedged in ice, beset and lacking a clear way forward, seems apt enough.

How to make sense of this? What can I do to sort out these frequent feelings of contradiction and stuckness, to not only put them in perspective but also to—hopefully—achieve greater freedom of motion? As a habitual academic, of course, my first response is to head off to the library and set about reading everything ever written about the struggles of trying to undertake critical intellectual work in an academic context. As there are literally shelves full of books and articles addressing various dimensions of academic and intellectual labor, the text I settle on is the late Edward Said’s<sup>2</sup> (1994) *Representations of the Intellectual*, which is an eloquent exploration of the role of the intellectual as an oppositional figure, at a time when the idea of the knowledge worker as a hired agent of the information economy holds such sway. Said is a distinguished literary and cultural critic, known for taking provocative stances on global issues (especially, as a person of Palestinian background, concerning the Middle East). I confess, I do glance over my shoulder a bit concerning this choice (I haven’t been keeping up; I know there have been controversies, but is he still politically *okay*? Is he still trendy?). But what the heck. Trendy or not, I think Said weighs in with a number of valuable insights and observations—“representations” as he would call them—that help shed some light on the struggles I find myself grappling with as an academic worker doing what needs to be done to keep my job and at the same time, striving to live up to an ideal of intellectual work as a radical force, antithetical to such habitual compliance.

In the next section of this article, I provide a general synopsis of Said’s argument, particularly his central assertions about the nature of the intellectual vocation and the place of intellectual work in the wider social—and institutional—context. This synopsis is followed in the subsequent section by a critical commentary on what I find both problematic and helpful about what Said has to say. I then offer some thoughts on how my review and critique of Said’s work have helped to inform my thinking about my experiences of tenure-track dismay and perplexity. Although I would never venture to describe myself as an “intellectual” in any lofty or rarefied sense of the term, there are important resonances between Said’s discussion of the role of the intellectual in society and my own more modest work as an educator and writer—a manner of intellectual engagement, no matter how humble—in a North American institution of higher education in the early 21st century.

The impetus for this article came from my desire to articulate my response to the phrase cited at the beginning of this article, regarding what we can do, in the context of academic labor, to

reclaim our voices as agents of change and promoters of critique and dissent. My concluding comments speak directly to this question, generalizing from my reflections on Said, matched with my own struggle to maintain a dissenting voice and an academic job at the same time. I began this article with an image of being beset in thick polar ice; I will close with a return to the Endurance metaphor, if not entirely free of the ice at least with a different way of looking at things, where conditions might not be quite as closed in as they seemed on first sight.

### Representations of Edward Said

The content of *Representations of the Intellectual* was originally presented as part of the prestigious Reith Lectures program on Britain's BBC radio in 1993. In this series of talks and subsequent book chapters, Said explores the nature of intellectual work and the various forms of relationship between intellectuals and the national, linguistic, and institutional contexts in which their work is situated. He touches on the university secondarily as one such context. His argument is informed by an international array of writers, scholars, and political figures who speak either as public intellectuals themselves or as social theorists examining the role of the intellectual in society (including, among others, Hannah Arendt, Julian Benda, Noam Chomsky, Alvin Gouldner, Antonio Gramsci, Russell Jacoby, Jean-Paul Sartre, Edward Shils, and Virginia Woolf). His aim, as he notes in the introduction, is to speak about intellectuals as advocates for independent thought rather than as party hacks or boosters of a set dogma or political position, on either the right or left. He takes up the point in the introduction, too, about the unfavorably elitist and "ivory tower" connotations sometimes associated with the term "intellectual." (It is, he states, precisely the tendency towards the deployment of terms in such a way, as "stereotypes and reductive categories" (Said, 1994, p. xi), that he wants to push past and challenge.)

There are several relevant themes in Said's argument. The first of these, not surprisingly, concerns what Said identifies as the fundamental characteristics of the intellectual vocation (a term he uses frequently). What do intellectuals *do*? At bottom, for Said, an intellectual is a person who knows how to use words. What genuine intellectual work requires, he states, is "a vocation for the art of representing" (Said, 1994, p. 13). Intellectuals are deft at communicating and "knowing when to intervene in language" (p. 20). But intellectuals are more than just adept rhetoricians. More important than linguistic skill is the *substance* of what the words and representations convey. The true core of the intellectual vocation involves uncompromising dedication to the work of rational and moral social critique. Intellectuals question things and go beyond easy certainties. They are vigilant confronters of received opinion. The emphasis is on unmasking or even smashing stereotypes and disturbing the accepted orthodoxies of the *status quo*. Intellectuals are "unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés" (p. 23) and have an aptitude for "maintaining a state of constant alertness, of a perpetual willingness not to let half-truths or received ideas steer one along" (p. 23). Said cites examples of noteworthy intellectuals from the world of fiction, such as the characters Yevgeny Bazarov in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* and Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. For Said, both are portrayed as holders of strong moral convictions, with a "passion for thinking...as a 'mode of experiencing the world'" (p. 16). Said asserts that the intellectual consciousness, in both fiction and reality, is one that is "skeptical, engaged, [and] unremittingly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgment" (p. 20), strongly dedicated to the twin goals of knowledge and freedom. Genuine intellectual thinking "can neither be predicted nor compelled into some slogan,

orthodox party line, or fixed dogma” (p. xii). It is neither for hire nor for sale.

Of course, in order to accomplish all this critical thinking and *status quo* puncturing, another characteristic of the intellectual is that she or he is often something of an outsider, in a relationship of marginality—or even exile—with the mainstream. As an extreme expression of this, Said draws on the work of European critic Julian Benda who, writing in the early part of the twentieth century, rallied against the “treason” of the European intellectual establishment who, to his mind, had abandoned disinterested intellectual activity in favor of political and national engagement. For Benda, according to Said, “real” intellectuals are a rare breed, a “tiny band of supergifted and morally endowed philosopher-kings [never queens] who constitute the conscience of mankind” (Said, 1994, p. 4).

From this vantage point, the intellectual is positioned at the very edge of ordinary society, in a state of almost permanent opposition to the *status quo* and willing to be burned at the stake, ostracized, or even crucified for one’s convictions. The intellectual, in this heightened form, is “a figure set apart, someone able to speak truth to power, a crusty, eloquent, fantastically courageous and angry individual...for whom no worldly power is too big and imposing to be criticized and pointedly taken to task” (Said, 1994, p. 8). The characters of Dedalus and Bazarov are again used as examples of the intellectual as an individual (again unquestionably male) set apart, solitary, aloof, and not fit for domestication (p. 68). Both are larger-than-life figures, mavericks, rogues, and rebels “completely outside established opinion” (p. 68). Although Said steps down from this romantically heightened extreme, he concurs with Benda that, even at a lesser elevation, the stance of the intellectual is “always to move away from the centralizing authorities towards the margins” (p. 63). A position of marginality sets the intellectual free from “having to always proceed with caution, afraid to overturn the applecart, anxious about upsetting fellow members of the corporation” (p. 63). It allows the intellectual to be responsive to innovation and experiment, rather than having to dutifully toe the proper authoritative line. In Said’s view, the intellectual tends to work in a spirit of opposition rather than accommodation, without worry about occasionally being offensive in conventional circles. Sometimes, indeed, “the whole point is to be embarrassing, contrary, even unpleasant” (p. 12). Vigilant criticism is never outweighed by the interests of solidarity, and is always to be undertaken for its own sake, rather than for the lesser goals of status, profit, or the fortification of ego (p. 20).

Yet, despite the importance of taking the position of outsider or exile, it remains impossible for the intellectual to operate in a vacuum, completely severed from all sociable attachment to anything. For one thing, as workers in language, intellectuals are unavoidably situated in a specific linguistic context, which also carries certain national commitments along with it. As Said (1994) states, “no modern intellectual...writes in Esperanto, that is, in a language designed either to belong to the whole world or to no particular country or tradition” (p. 27). No intellectual can avoid the particulars of language or place. One can only criticize those same particulars and hold them up for hard scrutiny. Despite the heroic detachment of fictional characters such as Bazarov and Dedalus or the aerial aloofness advocated by Benda, it is not possible to escape the world entirely, “into the realms of pure art and thought” (p. 21). Furthermore, along with the inevitable real world attachments to a given linguistic and national community come other commitments to a particular set of values and views. Even though the role of the intellectual typically involves taking a marginal stance, it must always be a marginal stance *about* something, in relation to the ideals and interests of a particular cause, place, or group. As an individual with a specific public role, the intellectual represents a message, a view, not only to but *for* a public (p. 11). Often this view might be associated with the interests of an oppressed or down-



trodden group not well accommodated by the dominant interests of the *status quo*—not only *from* the margins but *for* others unjustly relegated there. The role of the intellectual is to act as an advocate who *speaks out*, and “appeals to (rather than excoriates) as wide as possible a public,” (p. xiii) to get the message out there, to have one’s opinions heard.

However, the kinds of connections that an intellectual must negotiate are often complex. The connections of language, group, and nationality are one thing. But there are also connections with institutions to be reckoned with. It is important to examine the relationship between intellectuals and institutions, Said claims, because institutions can compel allegiances dangerous to the intellectual’s independent spirit. Being committed to a social cause is one thing, but being obligated to the corporation is another. For the intellectual, this is where the biggest area of danger lies. “[If you have to] worry about pleasing an audience...something in the intellectual’s vocation is, if not abrogated, then certainly inhibited” (Said, 1994, p. 68). The biggest obstacles to intellectual work aren’t the depredations of mass culture but the strictures and seductions of professional life, particularly when there are “offices to protect [and] territory to consolidate and guard” (p. xviii) coupled with the “rewards of accommodation, yea-saying and settling in” (p. 63). These threats to intellectual integrity aren’t anything new, says Said. They were certainly evident, he notes, in Flaubert’s diagnosis of the toll extracted by modern society in mid-19th century Paris, “with its endless distractions, its whirl of pleasures...[where] all ideas are marketable...all professions reduced to the pursuit of easy money and quick success” (p. 19). However, as Said sees it, they have become all the more prevalent in our current generation, where worldly powers and institutional interests “have co-opted the intelligentsia to an extraordinary degree” (p. xvi). Indeed, at one point Said reflects that with so many of the intelligentsia now operating in institutions where they are paid for their opinions, “one is impelled to wonder whether the individual intellectual as an independent voice can exist at all” (p. 69).

The real enemy of the intellectual vocation, for Said (1994), is

an attitude that I will call professionalism,... [i.e.,] thinking of your work as an intellectual as something you do for a living, between the hours of nine and five with one eye on the clock and another cocked at what is considered to be proper, professional behaviour—not rocking the boat, not straying outside the accepted paradigm or limits, making yourself marketable and above all presentable, hence uncontroversial and unpolitical and ‘objective.’ (p. 74)

He goes on to say that contained within this attitude are three particular institutional pressures that challenge an intellectual’s ingenuity and will. These are: *specialization*, which circumscribes one’s interests into a narrow area of knowledge, where “you become tame and accepting of whatever the so-called leaders in the field will allow” (p. 77); the *cult of expertise*, wherein one has to be “certified by the proper authorities...speaking the right language, citing the right authorities, holding down the right territory” (p. 77); and the *drift towards power and authority*, acceding to goals set by the interests not of knowledge but of government, the military-industrial complex, or the marketplace. These influences are iniquitous not least because they can engender habits of mind that “induce avoidance, that characteristic turning away from a difficult and principled position” (p. 100) for fear of seeming too controversial, of displeasing the boss or an authority figure, or of losing out on the promotion, the big prize, or the honorary degree. “If anything can denature, neutralize, and finally kill a passionate intellectual life it is the internalization of such habits” (p. 101).

Naturally, any discussion of institutions where intellectuals might be found leads to the university, which is generally considered the intellectual's primary habitat. Although Said doesn't specifically focus his comments on the university context of intellectual work, it comes up occasionally in the course of his argument. The potential ills of professionalization are far from absent from the university context, of course, particularly (in my view) as the modern university comes more and more under the sway of the ideology of technique, driven by government and corporate interests. Although Said is highly critical of such interests, on the whole he is surprisingly gentle with the university as a site where the neutralizing habits of mind associated with professionalism might fester. Tenure, it would seem, grants absolution. About the university, he says that "to accuse all intellectuals of being sellouts just because they earn their living working in a university...is a coarse and finally meaningless charge" (Said, 1994, p. 69). Later, he asserts that he thinks it "wrong to be invidious about the university... [B]eing an intellectual is not at all inconsistent with being an academic" (p. 72). He makes particular reference to Sartre on the role of the intellectual as a public figure, stating "I don't recall Sartre ever saying that the intellectual should remain outside the university necessarily" (p. 76). What Sartre said, he claims, is that the intellectual is never more an intellectual than when "surrounded, cajoled, hemmed in, hectored by society to be one thing or another, because only then and on that basis can intellectual work be constructed" (p. 76). (Perhaps this is what makes the university such an acceptable milieu.) Despite the encroaching blandishments of the professional attitude, Said states about the Western university that it "still can offer the intellectual a quasi-utopian space in which reflection and research can go on, albeit under new constraints and pressures" (p. 82).

But the question still is what to make of those constraints and pressures, old and new, inside universities and outside them. How to deal with them? Said concedes, for one thing, that the reality we enact is typically far from the imagined ideal. Even in the heroic fictional portrayals of the independent intellectual spirit in past—less institutionally domesticated—centuries, the "deviation of intellectuals from their vocation is still very often the case" (Said, 1994, p. 18). Moreover, it is not only in fiction but in real life that all the possibilities for falling short inevitably assail us. "Many intellectuals succumb completely to [the temptations of professionalism], and to some degree all of us do. No one is totally self-supporting, not even the greatest of free spirits" (p. 87). For Said, the thing to do, to keep oneself as intellectually honest as possible, is to try to maintain a different set of values and prerogatives from those on offer within the professional frame. To counter the temptations of professionalism, he recommends cultivating the contrary spirit of amateurism, "literally, an activity that is fueled by care and affection rather than by profit and selfish, narrow specialization" (p. 82). By maintaining the stance of the amateur, "instead of doing what one is supposed to do one can ask why one does it, who benefits from it, how can it reconnect with a personal project and original thoughts" (p. 83). In the end, intellectual work is always carried out in relationship with an audience and authorities. The crucial action, then, is to address those authorities not "as a professional supplicant, [but] as its unrewarded, amateur conscience" (p. 83).

### Stepping back

Well then. Such is my distillation of Edward Said's take, circa 1994, on the role of the intellectual. In response, particularly in light of the commitment to critical and independent thinking

that Said so passionately advocates in this book, it is important not to swallow all of this whole. The merit in taking anything at face value is limited. Thus, although there is much here that I find worthy of consideration, I want to set forth some of my hesitations and objections straight away.

First, in considering the matter of the amateur, it certainly sounds noble enough to assert the importance of approaching one's intellectual labors in a spirit of deep conviction rather than panting after fame, influence, or filthy lucre. The pay check and the big prize can indeed be base motivators. He is speaking about money on the scale of huge profits rather than simply a living wage, of course. However, it is difficult to consider this without acknowledging that few people are in a position to act from pure conviction alone. The cash and the position are seldom already in the bag; for most of us there are inevitably bills to pay and bread to put on the table. The virtues of amateurism are indeed admirable and beckoning, but they are difficult if not impossible to disentangle from the economic realities of having to work for a living. There is a worry, too, that Said's negative depiction of watching the clock (reckoning one should be paid for one's time) could have an unintended consequence of undermining the interests of the growing ranks of contingent faculty who sweat long unpaid hours over course preparation and essay grading and can barely make ends meet. They may not be intellectuals at the grand level that Said addresses, but their work still centers on the intellectual process of *thinking about things*, and many of them may well be motivated by the same kinds of ideals about intellectual work that he articulates. Following Said's argument, it would seem that they are better intellectuals through working into the wee hours because they *care*, rather than because they hope to get fair compensation for their labors. I recognize that this is hardly the position Said is advocating. However, there is a slippery slope down which his words might slide, where they could be used to justify shabby and unfair labor practices in the name of the amateur ideal.

Another thing I find myself struck by as I ponder Said's argument is a certain degree of aggrandizement of the intellectual as a rugged and heroic figure. Even though Said stands down from the extreme "rebel against the whole world" portrayal of the intellectual in such fictional characters as Dedalus and Bazarov, there is an unmistakable note of admiration for the irascible, no-holds-barred roguishness of the intellectual as lonely outcast, courageous warrior for truth above all. Although he addresses the importance of speaking on behalf of the subaltern and oppressed, he is speaking from an island; the Saidian intellectual stands resolutely alone. This personification is never more pronounced than in Said's (1994) discussion of Julian Benda's portrayal of the intellectual as belonging to a special and select minority—that "tiny band of [the] supergifted" (p. 4) out to save the world from the perils of swinish ignorance. Even though Said doesn't plump for this overstated view (the romanticism comes more from Benda than Said), he seems to hold a fondness for it all the same. Although he distances himself from the hard lines of Benda's politics, he is in general sympathy with Benda's individualist mentality. Maybe it's just me, but I can't help but think there is a slight Action Comics ring to all of this. Doesn't it all sound just a bit like...well, a bit like the movie *X-Men* and the tiny band of supergifted "Mutant" (read "outsider") heroes who, against all odds, strive to save the ordinary folks from their timorous prejudice and from their inability to appreciate the Mutants for their courage, for their gifts, for who they really are? Or maybe it's a bit like *The Matrix* (reloaded or not), with—once again—our tiny band of supergifted heroes seeking freedom from the bleak drone-like existence of the "desert of the real" (Wachowski et al., 1999). Or name your own action hero of choice—I suspect they are out-of-the-ordinary and courageous champions of the borderlands, defiantly standing up for truth and justice against the worldly powers of evil and corruption.



With the Action Comics parallel in mind, I am inclined to wonder if Said's ideal of intellectual work as valiant rebellion against the forces of orthodoxy and conformity doesn't have just a streak of being a wish-fulfillment fantasy for the bookish and the shy—the intellectual as a writerly Clark Kent, toiling alone in the study late at night, conjuring up visions of Superman. It's a fine ideal but skirts around many of the central problems of living and working in a world where truth does not lend itself to such easy exaltation, embedded as it is *within* the messy entanglements of political relationship, rather than as something to be revealed when the distorting political façade is stripped away.

As noted earlier, for Said the intellectual vocation *is*, in one of its fundamental aspects, primarily rooted in language and in “the art of representing” (Said, 1994, p. 13). So perhaps it is not too surprising that those representations might sometimes manifest—either intentionally or unbidden—certain elements of one's own secret (or not so secret) self-image. This raises another kind of temptation for the intellectual that Said does not acknowledge, with all his attention focused on the various perils of professionalism and co-optation. The other temptation is more intrinsic to the process of representation, in and of itself. The thing is that the words themselves can seduce too. There is the slide towards external motivation, sure enough—fitting in, caving in, cashing in. But there is the other slide, too, that must be reckoned with, when the words start to bend themselves to the governing metaphor, like a sunflower following the light. All representations lean towards fiction at some point, inflamed by the spirit of creative zeal. You say it this way because it *sounds* most true, not because it necessarily *is*. Said's reputation as a distinguished critic comes in part from his acute intellectual and moral sensibility, without question. But it comes in part also from his ability to turn a deft phrase. The temptation for the phrasemaker (I can feel it tugging at me as I write this now) is to *exaggerate*, is what I'm trying to say—to get carried away by the siren's call of the words themselves. For all the external lures that Said so clearly itemizes in his analysis of the intellectual vocation, without acknowledging this internal one, he misses one of the key features of the intellectual theater of action.

You might think that, with all these suspicions and criticisms, I am now ready to simply chuck the whole book in the garbage and discount Said as someone with nothing at all worthwhile to offer in helping me to understand my plight—those feelings of dismay and besetness I describe at the beginning of this article. In fact that is not the case at all. All limitations aside, I actually find Said's observations extremely helpful in situating my own struggles within a broader frame of reference. Indeed, the criticisms themselves are of great utility in helping me to put my finger on some of the things I have been grappling with in my tenure track unease.

It helps, for instance (although not without some sheepishness), to see my own private fantasies and delusions of intellectual grandeur projected right up there on Said's Action Comics movie screen, larger than life, for all the world to see. That's *it*, you see. Maverick, iconoclast, independent thinker, puncturer of orthodoxies. Ruthless pursuer of knowledge, freedom, justice, truth. Said's portrayal of the intellectual vocation captures something essential to my own mythic imaginings. That passion for thinking he attributes to Dedalus and Bazarov and the unremitting devotion to rational investigation, hard moral scrutiny, freedom and knowledge that he upholds as the epicenter of the intellectual's calling—these are my aspirations too. These are the same ambitions that simmer and bubble in my secret heart, that feel so thwarted when I find myself bending to the institutional logic of keeping my head down (or occasionally poking it up, for what I all too often realize later are the wrong reasons). I can hardly imagine I'm alone in this. There is a glorious literature of defiance in the humanities and social sciences, which Said barely skims the surface of. It is rousing, I think, because it touches the radical yearnings of many of us

and reaches to the unruly core of the thinking process, neither of which tend to sit well with the more doctrinaire requirements of the institutional context.

What Said (1994) also clearly captures are some of the internal and external landmarks that characterize the institutional context. His articulation of the “real world” of everyday life in institutions—the inventory of ordinary failings and temptations that stand in such contrast to our more heroic ideal—is also wearily familiar. When he speaks of “offices to protect [and] territory to consolidate and guard” (p. xviii) I can almost hear the thousands of conversations rattling through the meeting rooms and faculty lounges of universities across the land, expressing countless variations on this very theme. When he itemizes the narrowing characteristics of professionalism—the practical wisdom of not rocking the boat, upsetting the applecart, or straying too far outside the accepted limits of behavior, language or academic discipline—I can just see myself and my colleagues scrutinizing the minute details of the Faculty Handbook, Grant Application Procedures, and Guidelines for Authors to ensure that our actions remain properly presentable to all the appropriate holders of academic currency: the tenure granters, bestowers of funds, and reviewers of manuscripts for publication. Even my deliberations about whether or not Said’s book would be an appropriate choice for discussion in this article reflects a concern not so much for independent thinking as for keeping on the right side of the current arbiters of intellectual taste. Accommodation, yea-saying, and settling in? The fortification of status and ego (in the humanities and social sciences we can generally leave profit out of the picture)? The tripartite perils of narrow specialization, the cult of expertise, and the drift towards power and authority? You bet! When Said describes the habits of mind that induce avoidance and neutralize a passionate intellectual life, it strikes me that he is simply itemizing some of the common (some might say defining) features of the academic landscape.

This brings me to one further concern about Said’s observations that I did not mention in my catalogue of hesitations earlier. Given my shouts of recognition of the kinds of institutional constraints that Said describes, I am somewhat out of sympathy with his air of tolerance towards the university as an institution relatively free, it would seem, from such tarnishment. Since what he says about institutions sounds like just about any university I have ever known, it is curious that he repeatedly makes the point of exempting the university from the field. Maybe it’s just that I don’t fully appreciate how good I have it, here in my little corner of quasi-utopia (which may well be true—I’ve never worked as a journalist or in a think tank, for instance, to have a sense of the contrast; I don’t know that Said has either). But it could also be that Said himself has (as we all do) his own territory to consolidate or guard, interests to protect, and colleagues and associates to keep on the right side of. It could be moreover that the temptations toward compromise and avoidance that he is actually party to are easier to understand and forgive than those viewed from a greater distance. Said makes the comment that we in the West have spent more time “worrying about the restrictions on thought and intellectual freedom” (Said, 1994, p. 81) in other nationalities and truth regimes (e.g., Soviet communism) than our own. We “have not been as fastidious in considering the threats to an individual intellectual of [the kind of] system that rewards intellectual conformity” (p. 81) that we are more used to. The devils, as he puts it, are always easier to see on the other side. It’s much harder to point the finger of critique at the work done in one’s own shop (except perhaps in the form of sardonic humor, the tradition of the academic novel being a case in point. But these tend to be written more by habitual mavericks who happen to graze at the edge of the academic herd). The university being the particular kind of shop that Said himself is most at home in, perhaps he makes this point less by saying it than by reflecting it, in his inclination to let the university off the hook.

Be that as it may, even though Said does not explicitly name the university as one of the institutional contexts where the scope for intellectual work can be cramped by multiple enticements towards avoidance and compromise, it certainly captures the tone, for me, of my own predicament, trying to balance the contrasting pulls towards contesting authority on the one hand and working within it on the other. Said puts his finger on the pulse of my struggle, even though he doesn't situate it in the world in the same way I would. Although he talks about institutions in a way that brackets the university from the conversation, from my perspective the academic context is as much a part of the picture as any other institutional venue.

Another thing I find useful from my reading of Said is his use of the language of temptation and seduction to characterize the various things that can pull intellectual work off course and away from its central mission. What he primarily portrays are those associated with the institutional context, as discussed above. But there are two further forms of seduction that I have also gained a deeper appreciation of, although these come as much from reading between the lines as from Said's words themselves. For one thing, I have come to see that the ideal of the ruggedly independent thinker, the intellectual as radical and free spirit, can be a form of seduction too. Although the value of independent thought remains central, I have a keener realization of how easy it is to get caught up in certain conceits—to harbor notions that the heroic ideal is *actual*, simply because it can be imagined; to believe that who we think we could be as academics, is in fact who we are. Said reveals how readily the intellectual ideal can be inflated. But, like the *status quo*, perhaps it could occasionally use some puncturing too. For instance, contrary to the vision of intellectual work as courageous truth-quest, as some of Said's sources portray it, one of the characters in Richard Russo's comic academic novel *Straight Man* (1997) muses instead that perhaps "one of the deepest purposes of intellectual sophistication is to provide distance between us and our most disturbing personal truths and gnawing fears" (p. 382). Intellectual work as a form of *escape*? Abstract and occasionally abstruse theorizing as a way to build a defense against the real, rather than to penetrate its deepest mysteries? Well, there might be a grain of truth in that, too. Bazarov and Dedalus may be great icons of independent thought, but neither of them strikes me as characters one would want to spend much time with. More importantly, for all their rational acuity, neither of them reveals much in the way of actual wisdom or insight into themselves or the world around them. The seduction is towards pretension here (no stranger to the academy), exaggerating the ideal of heroic truth-seeking, without keeping a wary eye on what kinds of compromises, limits, hidden agendas, unresolved conflicts, and personal or political motives might also be a part of the scene.

And then, too, as I touched on earlier, there is the fundamental seduction involved in the whole process of trying to communicate ideas with words. Again, this is something that Said says little about directly. However, it is an awareness that has grown in the course of writing this article. Having started with an image of the Endurance beset in the ice, for instance, I have had to proceed in a way that remains consistent with this metaphor. While doing so, I have become conscious not only of how much the metaphor delimits the interpretation but also of how this delimitation makes my account both more fictional and more truthful at the same time. The fiction is that *of course* I'm not as wretchedly beset as I make myself out to be, nor is the university as compromised an institutional terrain as I've made it appear. The truth is that the metaphor helps express just how bleak and frigid it *feels* sometimes, when things come bumping in from all sides and when the institutional limits to truth-seeking seem most constraining. The seduction is to allow the metaphor to run away with the whole story altogether and to start believing the words as the truth because that's how they line up on the page. The vocation of intellectual work

may be founded in the art of representing, as Said claims, but the hardest work of it lies in constantly trying to hold the representations accountable to the underlying meanings they are intended to convey.

On the topic of words, seduction is obviously a laden term to use in attempting to characterize all of this, with its inevitable connotations of entrapment and provocation to act against one's better judgment. However, to speak of seduction isn't necessarily to conceive of the world as an entirely fallen place festooned with dangers and perils to subvert the innocent wayfarer (or to conceive of the wayfarer as ever entirely innocent). Maybe these are just the plain facts of the world—call them traps or call them simply features of the landscape in any institutional (or national, or linguistic) context. There is always a struggle between the hope and the reality, it would seem—between the need to challenge authority and the equal need to work within whatever constraints that authority imposes. This struggle is central to the very nature of intellectual work itself, as we work within and against the constraints of language. So it makes sense that the same kind of struggle also plays out within the hearts, minds, and social contexts in which the work is done.

## Endurance

Let me return, in closing, to those feelings of being beset, ground down, and out of harmony I described at the outset, that led me to feel a certain kinship with the *Endurance*, trapped in the ice. I admit these feelings haven't gone away entirely as a result of this analysis. But happily things do not look quite the same or quite as stuck. To get back to Shackleton and the *Endurance* (and risk pushing the metaphor beyond the breaking point), when viewed from a wider angle the story is about far more than just getting stuck. Okay, so the ship actually did sink in the end, eventually crushed to pieces by the immense pressure of the ice. But the thing about the Shackleton expedition that captures the imagination is that even after the ship has been lost, the band of adventurers carries on, survives even worse obstacles, accomplishes astonishing feats of navigational skill and ingenuity, and still makes it home for tea at the end of the ordeal (some of them just in time to be killed in the First World War, but that's another story). There is something about that kind of temerity—indeed, *endurance*—in the face of adversity, and the idea of seeing things through over the long haul, that is grandly inspiring and even helpful in putting one's lesser, but more immediate, difficulties in perspective. Furthermore, according to Alexander (1998), it was during the period the *Endurance* was beset that the expedition photographer, Frank Hurley, managed to take some of his best photographs. In his diary, he describes the lost bearings, bumped shins, stumbling around in deep snow and darkness, temporary half-blindness—and exhilarating joy—that accompanied this phase of his photographic work. In the academic context, this leads back to Said's comments on Sartre and the idea that maybe it isn't in the free places but the stuck ones where the best—intellectual or photographic—work is done. Like Frank Hurley's photographs, perhaps intellectual work isn't best achieved in conditions of pure freedom, which may not exist anyway, but in whichever spaces can be found or carved out for them, accepting that there will be cold nights, scrapes, bruises, and a good deal of stumbling around in the dark—as well as a few dazzling moments—along the way.

Do I actually believe this? Or is it just the allure of the metaphor again, running on ahead as I venture towards some kind of conclusion? Well, it has a nice enough philosophical ring to it, and there is probably a dollop of wisdom in there that I should pay closer attention to the next time I

am feeling tragically thwarted by what Russo (1997) describes as the “epic failures of imagination and goodwill” (p. 66) that can beset the academic institution. However, I’m not sure I want to embrace it with *that* much equanimity. As with Said’s comments on amateurism, there is a fine line between acceptance and endorsement of imperfect—or unpaid—conditions. In the words of moral philosopher Michael Walzer (1988), who also writes eloquently (although frequently in sharp disagreement with Said) about intellectual work as social criticism, complaining is an important human task that lifts people out of passive acquiescence to—or even celebration of—the world’s fallen state. “Criticize the world,” he says, “it needs it” (p. x).

But the question still is, how *do* we constructively criticize the world and live in it at the same time? Or, to return to the variant of this question that was posed at the outset, how do we, as academics, “reclaim our voices as agents of change and promoters of critique and dissent?” In light of my reflections on Said, my own work, and the Endurance stuck in the ice, it is not a question easily approached straight on. As Said (1994) states, when he introduces the idea of representations, “you do what you do according to an idea or representation you have of yourself as doing that thing” (p. xv). So what self-representations do we have—what do we think we’re doing—when we describe ourselves this way? One thought that occurs to me is that maybe “reclaiming” our voices is a bit more than we truly can hope for. In fact, they may not be voices that we ever actually had in the first place—or at least not in the heroic, X-Men proportions that our mythic imaginings might envision them. To (re)claim our dissenting and critiquing voices, we must first pay close attention to the conditions in which our speaking occurs. We work in institutions and disciplines that expect our compliance and loyalty, and by and large we give it, whether we always want to or not. For the most part we do what we do to keep on the right side of our colleagues, make a good impression (and occasionally even show off a bit), and get the promotions and rewards we feel we deserve. We may imagine our reclaimed selves as free, wild and *right*, but by and large, we are, and are likely to remain, a pretty housebroken lot—right on some occasions, embarrassed, embarrassing, or full of ourselves on other occasions, and seldom (except in fleeting glimpses) transcendently clear on the bigger picture.

But that is not to say that dissent and critique are beyond us. We may be tamer than we like to think, but we’re not corpses; our voices may not be mighty Mutant powers, but they are still our voices. Perhaps the really subversive thing would be to see the opportunities for dissidence not in grand “speaking truth to power” gestures but in our minute, daily responses to the various seductions and allurements that characterize both the nature of the intellectual work we do and the far-from-perfect academic institutions in which we do it. It seems to be the way of things that what we profess, as intellectuals and academics, and what we do every day don’t always run on the same tracks. One step towards reclaiming our dissenting voices, or even claiming them for the first time, might start with paying closer attention to what we are saying, what we are doing, and what happens in the gap between the two. The trick of intellectual work, in the part of it that involves trying to get the words right, is to “find the hinge on which the paradox swings” (Lane, 1998, p. 81) between control and freedom, truth and fiction. Maybe the paradox between the intellectual vocation and the academic institution swings on this same hinge.

Finally, I want to return to Said’s important point that a central aspect of intellectual work involves not only rational and moral critique but critique on behalf of just causes and oppressed groups. My attention has been more centered on Said’s comments about the institutional, rather than advocational, contexts of intellectual work, not because they are more important but because they are more connected to the immediate foreground in which academic work is carried out. One of the things I have been troubled by, in sorting out my own experience of the conflict-



ing tensions between intellectual and academic work, are the many ways in which the academic house is not in order. Maybe that's just how it always is and always will be, as I come dangerously close to arguing above—simply the way of all institutions, so be it. However, one of the reasons why I think it is so important to pay attention to the gaps and lacunae between what we say and what we do as academics is because I think it will make us not only better thinkers but better advocates too. As an academic, I sometimes get nervous about what kind of example we are setting, and what kind of advocating we can do, when I think of those multiple forms of seduction we operate in the midst of and are so frequently inclined to fall prey to. Taking the risk of speaking openly about the conditions of our own labor and the various seductions that beset us is no grand solution to the problems of the world, but at least it offers a small step towards speaking truth to (and about) the very powers in which we are inevitably enmeshed.

## NOTES

1. Quote taken from the call for papers for the Academic Labor and the New Politics of Consensus Conference, Program in the Human Sciences, George Washington University, February 28, 2003.
2. This article was conceptualized and first written prior to Said's death in 2003. In the spirit of his life living on in his work, I have chosen to retain the present tense in this discussion.

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