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Humanism in Edward Said's 'Late Style'

A Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis aims at proving that Edward W. Said is at odds not only with his time but with himself as well, in his turning to humanism. Said is well known as a post-colonial theorist, in the post-modernist era, which is an era of conflict, fragmentation, claiming objectivity, which not only opposes humanism but also considers it a kind of anachronism or history-bound category. Said borrows a term from Theodor Adorno, and applies it to many intellectuals. This term is called 'Late Style,' which contains the idea of contradiction, in which the artist contradicts not only himself but his time as well. In this thesis I apply the term 'late Style', based on Edward Said's interpretation of the term, to Edward Said himself to reveal the contradiction in what Said had earlier pointed out and wrote about.

The thesis is divided into three chapters as follows:

Chapter One

This chapter consists of two parts: part one is entitled: Humanism: A Historical Survey. In part two 'Late Style' I display two conceptions of 'late style'. The first one is Theodor Adorno's 'late style', and the second is Said's.

Chapter Two

This chapter is devoted to Edward Said as an entrance in which notions like paradox of identity, worldliness, and secular criticism are discussed in an attempt to understand Said's turning to humanism and the implied contradiction of this turning.

Chapter Three

Humanism as Said's 'Late Style' investigates Said's understanding of humanism in its American context; I prove that Said's humanism is his turning point in his life that sets him as a late figure.

Conclusion

The conclusion is a synthesis of the findings of the study.

Chapter One

**Humanism and Late Style: Definitions and
Historical Perspectives**

This chapter falls into two parts. Part one defines and traces the genealogy of the terms included in the title 'humanism' and 'late style'. Humanism as a term has its deep roots in history, while 'late style' is first mentioned in Theodor Adorno's essay "*Spätstil Beethoven*" or Beethoven's "Late Style" in 1937. A historical survey of humanism and a review of the concept of late style provide the framework of the main argument of the thesis, which is how Said's intellectual trajectory ends with a kind of conversion to humanism, which I consider Said's 'Late Style'.

The historical survey of humanism aims at showing the elusive nature of the term and how it is connected with some other literary and cultural movements through its journey in history. More important to my thesis is to show how humanism agrees or disagrees with other movements. Under the titles of anti-humanistic and pro-humanistic movements, I attempt to draw a quick, but an overall view of the cultural scene, for the ultimate goal of putting Edward Said and his version of humanism in confrontation, it is not only with his time, but with himself as well and consequently to prove that humanism is Edward Said's main contradiction.

To begin with, humanism is divided into Renaissance Humanism and American Humanism for displaying different kinds of humanism until Said's time in the post-modernist era. Displaying humanism as such helps putting Said's version of humanism in its context as a first step to support the thesis's main argument. The second part is entitled: 'Late Style' where Edward Said's book, *On Late Style* (2006), is reviewed and analyzed to reach to main conclusion.

Part one: Humanism

Humanism is a school of thought and a cultural movement, which has deep roots in the history of humanity. To depict its history or story one has to be aware of its elusive nature. To illustrate, humanism appeared in many movements like

secularism, neo-classicism, renaissance and other philosophical trends fell under the umbrella of humanism.

According to *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, humanism is “a belief system based on the principle that people's spiritual and emotional needs can be fulfilled without following a religion”. A derivative of humanism is the word humane, which means “showing kindness, care, and sympathy towards others”. On the other hand, a humanist (n.) is “a person who believes in humanism,” and a humanitarian is a person who is involved in or connected with improving people's lives and reducing suffering. In addition, “the humanities are the study of subjects like literature, language, history, and philosophy” (*Cambridge International Dictionary of English* 692). The importance of mentioning these derivatives is that their meanings are dialectical, at least for Said's contemporaries.

Depicting the etymology of the word humanist, Peter Herde explains that the word ‘*umanista*’, which was famous among the scholars of Italian universities, was taken over into Latin as ‘*humanista*’. The term was first applied to the professors and students of rhetoric, however, as late as the end of the fifteenth century the word was also applied to the students of classical learning. The abstract noun 'humanism' is of even later origin; it was first used by German scholars of the early nineteenth century (*History of Ideas*, 515)

Howard Bachelor in his *Lexicon Universal Encyclopedia* (1983) defines humanism as a “philosophical and educational creed that emphasizes the central importance of human values as opposed to religious dogma, or abstract reasoning” (299). The philosophical definition of humanism was first formulated during the Italian Renaissance at the beginning of the 15th century. It began to be as the literary study of classical Greek and Roman in the mid-15th century. Later it became a broad

philosophical outlook based on the conviction that a person is “an autonomous creature, capable of reason, whose own complex nature is the only proper test of moral truth and goodness” (Bachelor 299). It is worth noting that the definition, as thus, contains untenable contradiction, in the sense that it calls for autonomy, and describes man as ‘autonomous creature’ while man still sticks to tutelage, man just replaces religious tutelage with Greek and Roman model.

Adding to this, Nicola Abbagnano in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (1967) defines humanism as "a philosophical and literary movement" which by time came to denote “any philosophy which recognizes the value or dignity of man and makes him the measure of all things” (69). The philosophical perspective of humanism focuses on the importance, dignity, and value of man. This may be a reaction to man's affiliation to the rigid rules of the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. Philosophically, man contemplates, meditates the universe, and decides to control it.

To view humanism from sociological perspective, in which human needs and human fulfilment are considered without referring to ‘divine agencies’, may be considered as an alternative to religion (*The Sage Dictionary of Sociology* 140). With the waning of the Catholic Church in the West, humanist associations have attempted to “fill the ritual gap by creating non-religious alternatives to church baptisms, wedding, and funerals. It may more broadly mean an emphasis on human creativity and the basic worth of human beings” (*The Sage Dictionary of Sociology* 140). Sociologically, humanists replace non-religious activities embodied in social rituals to emphasize that man is capable of managing his life apart from religious instructions and teachings.

Humanism: A Historical Survey

Humanism can be traced back as far as the fifth century B.C. in Protagoras' dictum: "Man is the measure of all things". As Max C. Otto in *Collier's Encyclopedia* (1986) postulates that when Socrates, at the time of Protagoras, shifted from the study of physical nature, to the study of man he, too, "exemplified the humanistic trend" (349). Thus, there were three main aspects in relation to the humanistic trend. The first aspect focused on the sensual experience of the world, the second related to the connection of man with other living creature, and the third is the relative nature of concepts of truth, beauty, and goodness (Otto 349). Studying these aspects sheds light on the early beginnings of humanism in Socrates' time, because to call for the authenticity of sensory experience of the world is to allow the experimental science to appear, because of man's trust of his senses as the tools nature provides him with. The second aspect is related to the emphasis on the connection of man to other creatures. This aspect asserts the existence of the humanistic trend since Socrates' time, because on his way to consider himself 'the measure of all things', man realizes that he has to control other creatures. The third aspect is that man realizes his relative nature controlled by time and space, consequently, he accepts the relative nature of the main concepts, truth, beauty, and, goodness.

Socrates is a remarkable example of the secular humanist that relied on skepticism to achieve his target. Though every religion has its sages who claim to know the absolute truth, it is Socrates, alone among famous sages, who claims to know nothing. Each sage devised a set of rules or laws while Socrates gave us a method of questioning the rules and/or the laws. In that way, Socrates is the remarkable example of skeptical humanist. He stands as a symbol, of both Greek rationalism and the humanist tradition that grew out of it ("What is Humanism?" 5)

In addition to Socrates, there have been other figures in the long path of advocating the philosophy of humanism who were persecuted because of their intellectual trajectory towards the humanistic trend. For example, Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), the Italian philosopher, and astronomer was “burned at the stake by the Catholic Inquisition in 1600, together with his books” (*The Philosophy of Humanism* 9-10). Another example is Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677) who was out-casted due to his extremely naturalistic views on God, the world, human beings, and knowledge (*The Philosophy of Humanism* 9-10). The persecution of the advocates of humanism, resonates Said's situation as a humanist in the post- modernist era.

Humanism and Secularism

One of the terms used interchangeably with humanism is secularism. I buttress that humanism is a secular movement. In the fifth century B.C. the meaning of secularism was developed through the thought of the Greek philosopher Protagoras. He states that “Man is the measure of all things” with all the implications of man's incapability to know the absolute truth. Protagoras' dictum is based on his thought of relativism, which means that as long as we are all subjective beings, so everything around us depends on our perception, consequently, the whole universe revolves around the human power to think (*Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*). Mourad Wahba defines secularism as “thinking about the relative in a relative way, and not in an absolute way,” he adds that the history of secularism started in the sixth century B.C. when the Greek philosopher Pythagoras declared his theory of the rotation of earth. This declaration ended with putting his home in fire (*Quartets of Democracy* 13¹).

1 Translation from Arabic to English is mine.

In the third stage in the history of secularism, Copernicus played a major role. In his book *The Orbit Circuited* (1543) he proved not only that earth rotates around Sun, but also that earth is not the center of the universe. Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) stated his preconception to Copernicus' theory in 1613 (*Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*). After Galileo, it was Bruno, who thought that 'place and time' are relative that led him to a conclusion: so long as man lives in relative circumstances, he is incapable of realizing the absolute Truth. (Wahba 17²) After Bruno, A new school of thought appeared, not far from him in Italy, and it was called Renaissance humanism. Worthy to be noted is that prior to Renaissance humanism, the humanistic trend was dealt with as an individual 'dangerous' thought.

Renaissance Humanism

For almost ten centuries, medieval Christian theologians had dominated philosophy in Europe. At the beginning of the fifteenth century, Europe experienced a dramatic intellectual movement called the *Renaissance*, which emphasized the resurgence of science and culture through classical influences. The term "renaissance" literally means 'rebirth' and was first used in the 19th century to refer to this extraordinary period. It set a new direction for art, architecture, literature, scientific discovery, and world exploration (Fieser).

One of the most distinctive intellectual movements within the Renaissance was humanism, which was originally called humanities, that is the study of humanity. The main emphasis of humanism was secular education using Greek and Latin classics, rather than medieval sources. Italian humanists associated themselves with Platonism, Aristotelianism, Epicureanism, or Skepticism (Fieser). Humanists' concern

² Translation from Arabic to English is mine.

was to define the human place in God's plan and the relation of the human to the divine; therefore, they centered all their thought on the 'human' relation to the divine, and hence called themselves 'humanists' (Hooker 2). Pico Della Mirandola (1463-1494) was one of the most prominent humanistic philosophers of the Renaissance, a Platonist who emphasized the "uniqueness of human nature". As James Fieser explains, Pico believed that "our uniqueness as human beings stems from our freedom to carve out our own values, projects and natures" (*The History of Philosophy: A Short Survey*). Fieser also added that Pico drew attention to the freedom of man and his dignity. Man has the free will to put himself in any place in The Great Chain of Being. Man is able to choose his descent to the levels of animals or ascent to the level of angels. This is a way to define Renaissance humanism, which values man's free will.

A central feature of Pico's philosophy is the concept of 'The Great Chain of Being'. Pico describes how God instructed Adam, the first human being, about his freedom to choose his own destiny; he stresses, "in accord with your free will, your destiny is in your own hands and you are confined to no bonds. You will fix the limits of your nature yourself. I have put you in the center so that you may look around and examine the world's content" (Fieser). Pico is one of the first European thinkers to consider that hallmark of being human, is his ability to choose, that is to say of freedom. Commenting on Pico's book *Oration on the Dignity of Man* Richard Hooker observes that in traditional Platonic Christianity, humanity occupied a middle position in the hierarchy of the universe, Pico unhinged humanity from that position and claimed that human beings could occupy any position whatsoever in the chain of being. Throughout the history of human according to Pico, one can find that nothing remains stable. No faith, no philosophy, no worldview is ever static; the only eternal