Chapter 2

The Intending Self and Method

Edward Said is quite literally one of the most frequently cited, interviewed and published oppositional figure in the United States and Britain. Said’s writings over the past quarter century has resolutely resisted any easy disciplinary or professional pigeon-holing. He published *Orientalism* in 1978, which is a seminal work in the comparatively new field of postcolonial studies. Since *Orientalism*, which changed his intellectual work, he has increasingly come to be integrated with his political commitments. After this book he published *The Question of Palestine*(1979) and *Covering Islam*(1981). The trilogy examines Said’s conceptual framework in analysing the nature of the encounter between East and West. Said has for more than twenty years been the most visible spokesman for the Palestinian cause in the United States. However critical he may be of the legacy of European literature, in books like *Orientalism* and *The World, the Text and the Critic* [1983] he continues to harbour enormous care
and respect for the European high cultural tradition. Born in Jerusalem, Palestine, Edward Said is the product of a complex historical conjecture. His father was a respected businessman and a Palestinian Christian. Edward Said's wife and mother hail from Lebanon and Said has written eloquently on this country's tragic destruction since the mid-1970s. Said's family fled Palestine in 1948. His schooling was done in Egypt. Later he was sent to the United States to complete his secondary education and attend University. He studied English and History at Princeton where he met Richard Blackmur who was a life-long influence on his literary criticism. Said completed his formal academic training at Harvard where he read comparative literature and wrote a doctoral thesis on Joseph Conrad.

A Christian Arab raised in the Middle East but almost exclusively western educated, he had imbibed a strong respect for the canon of European literature. Urban and charming, he is a political activist with a difference. He was cultured in quite traditional even conservative ways. Said's career has been as variegated in its objects of interest and attention as
the historical forces he has been compelled to negotiate. Affected by all those cross-currents, Said exhibits a lot of paradoxes in his career and life.

Said’s connection with Palestine, prior to 1967, was essentially limited to his ties with his family and friends. His entire family became refugees as a result of the 1948 war. It was during this time that his political awareness was mostly shaped by an anti-colonialism directed against the British. By 1963, the Said family was centred in Beirut. After the dispossession of the Palestinians in 1948 and the 1956 invasion of Egypt by Britain, France and Israel, the Arab Middle East was imbued with a strong sense of anti-imperialism. In this period Said was at Harvard and Columbia. His work had little to do with Palestine and the Arabs or the Middle East.

It was his experiences as an Arab living in the US during the 1967 wars that totally changed his political attitude. It was an experience in humiliation which eventually led him to write Orientalism. Orient in Western consciousness is denied the most basic human attributes. Arabs in fact suffered or were victimised by the victims of the Holocaust. The
Americans with their narrow political and economic interests supported the Israelis lavishly.

As a thinker and political activist throughout his life, Said has been tirelessly contesting the standard caricature of the politically active Arab as a terrorist, barbarian and maniac. Trained in comparative literature, a polygot who is proficient in English, Arabic and French and literate in Spanish, German, Italian and Latin, Said can legitimately claim to the tradition of the great scholars of Europe. Highly cultured, steeped in European classical music, well-travelled, he incarnates the very ideal of the cosmopolitan intellectual.

Edward Said’s work embodies values essential to intellectual responsibility: breadth and depth of knowledge, historical and scholarly rigour and an astute sense of political morality.

*Beginnings: Intention and Method* is one of the earliest theoretical works written by Edward Said. In it, we can see the emergence of all the interests associated with Said’s later writings including Orientalism, his work on intellectuals, wordliness and the analytical category of geography. As
Said himself puts it, some of the important problems raised in this work are these: What is a beginning? What must one do in order to begin? What is special about beginning as an activity or a moment or a place? Can one begin whenever one pleases? What is necessary for beginning? Historically, is there one sort of moment most propitious for beginning, one sort of individual for whom beginning is the most important of activities? For the work of literature, how important is the beginning? Are such questions about beginning worth raising? And if so, can they be treated or answered correctly, intelligibly, informatively? (XXI)

Each of the book's six chapters, or episodes has an internal coherence that depends on some aspect of beginning: each covers a historical pattern (the development of the novel, for example), that does not stray very far from the core subject of beginnings. Altogether, these six episodes constitute a structure for studying beginnings, though not in a linear fashion. The major argument is:

that beginnings are first and important, but not always evident, that beginning is
basically an activity which intimately implies return and repetition rather than simple linear accomplishment, that beginning and beginning again are historical whereas orgins are divine, that a beginning not only creates but is its own method because it has intention. In short, beginning is making or producing difference, but here is the greatest fascination in the subject difference which is the result of combining the already familiar with the fertile novelty of human work in language (XXIII).

Each of Said's six chapters builds on this interplay between the new and the customary without which a beginning cannot really take place. Between 1967, when Said was working on the earliest parts of this book, and 1975, when it was published, the study of literature entered what came to be seen as a crisis, notably in Britain and America, but in many other countries too. As Michael Wood puts it:
Structuralism was regarded as either a great intellectual adventure or colossal fraud, depending on one's tastes and allegiances. There was no poststructuralism and post-modernism, although flickering in the air, was far from the centre of anyone's consciousness. There was an interest in Jacques Lacan but the vogue for figures like Walter Benjamin and Theodore W Adorno was still some way off. (XI)

It is worth pausing over the word 'structure' which plays a considerable role in *Beginnings*, and indeed in Said's later work. This does not make Said a structuralist but it does signal a preference and an argument. A structure, for Said, represents a refusal of automatic causality. It is a shape that can change. It is chosen not inherited. It is an invention or a discovery not a tradition or lineage. It is what the idea of a secular, non dynastic beginning uncovers and the notion of a founding, religious origin seeks to hide.
The crisis in literary study attracted all kinds of slogans and diagnoses, but many would agree that it grew out of the long consensus that preceded it, or more precisely, that it was a concrete response to the length and nature of that consensus. The consensus allowed for many divergences, for approaches that saw themselves as textual, biographical, formalist, historical, anti-historical, political, a-political. But the high value of literature itself was taken for granted by all parties. A modernist canon was firmly in place, and not welcoming to new aspirants. Literature was unfailingly serious, and carefully segregated from other forms of cultural activity. And the purpose of literature, quite apart from its value, was not in question. Even if we had forgotten what literature was for, we didn’t feel the need to ask. Obviously, this consensus could not go on and it did not. The value and purpose of literature became an issue. The canon was perturbed, and literature was related to other modes and media, high and low. What came to be called ‘Theory’ was not an answer to these questions. It was a way of asking them in a cultural world which seemed discreetly to have outlawed
Said had read and learned from Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, especially, Barthes and Foucault and he played a considerable role in introducing them and other European thinkers to British and American readers. But the intellectual pre-history of *Beginnings* goes a little further back: to the work of scholars like Erich Auerbach, poets and critics like Paul Valery and R.P. Blackmur, critic-philosophers like George Lukacs and Maurice Morleau-Ponty. One could extend this list but the point is less the names than the strenuous work of the mind they represent, and what makes of contemporary criticism through his reading of them.

In *Beginnings* Said offers us a doubly new reading of the heroic unsettled age of literary modernism, identified here as "a period of about 50 years" starting around 1875. It is first, a positive reading of a development often seen as darkly, elegiacally negative. Said's modernism is as disturbed and embattled as the old one, but it is more independant of past disasters, less nostalgiac, more open to the world. And second, this is a reading of modernism which returns not only
to its lived context, but to its grandest intellectual ambitions. Modernism, often seen now as a cramped and anxious lingering among literary monuments, had a great appetite for physics and philosophy and anthropology, and was eager to learn from and contribute to the developing human sciences. Reading Renan, Nietzsche and Freud alongside his chosen novelists Said is not abandoning literature but accompanying it on its travels. He is treating the world of the turning century as the crisscrossing intellectual tumult it was.

Said distinguishes between a beginning and an origin. In contrast to an origin, like the world of God’s creation or the natural life of one’s birth, a beginning one must make for oneself, not out of nothing for man lacks the divine, originating, creative powers, but from what already exists. This is one of the central themes of Beginnings: the difficult concept of a production or assemblage which is not disorder or heterogeneity, and yet not assimilable to the familiar models of order-in which origin fathers forth a sequence leading without break to some foreordained end. In place of
these models Said puts the notion of an assemblage broken by
gaps, lacunae, and incompatibilities which is nevertheless
rigorously held by what Said calls a "beginning intention" and
by "method". What such an alternative form of order might
be is the subject of Beginnings.

Beginnings is generated in part by a desire to rethink
Vico, an Italian philosopher of eighteenth century whose book,
The New Science published in 1725, set forth a revolutionary
philosophy. Vico is generally considered as the first histori-
cal critic who related literature to the geographical conditions
in which they were written. Said has derived several of his
ideas from Vico. The very concept of beginning is derived
from Vico who distinguishes between origins and beginnings-
one is divine and the other is human. Explaining how Vico's
concept of beginning makes him a modern thinker, Said
remarks, "Vico is the prototypical modern thinker who
perceives beginnings as an activity requiring the writer to
maintain an unstraying obligation to practical reality and
sympathetic imagination in equally strong parts". (Said,
Beginnings 349) Said learns from Vico that any attempt at
beginning requires not only grounding in reality but also imagination which can sympathetically formulate it.

Every "Genesis" whether scared or profane is a mythical event not because there are no beginnings but because the mind comes too late to apprehend them and therefore must construct their simulacra by composing a genesis or history. Thus *Genesis* may tell us more about man's need for a discourse than about how things were in the beginning. A Viconian theory would have it that *Genesis* originates in the poetic logic of human thinking.

Each chapter of this book is a new beginning in an attempt to stabilise the idea of beginning as it plays among an assortment of associated concepts, "innovation, novelty, originality, revolution, change, convention, tradition, period, authority, influence to name a few" (*Beginnings* 6). Said's own text is diverted from one text to another, for example, (Chapter 1 "Beginning Ideas", Chapter 2 "A meditation on Beginning") From the standpoint of modern writing beginnings can be comprehended only in the form of a "problematics", that is by means of an enquiry into the
difficulties of what it means to begin. Said distributes these
difficulties across three broad topics: a theory of text, a theory
of the novel, and his own writing as literary critic. In ‘Medita­tion
on Beginning’ Said offers this instance of the general
problem:

a transitive beginning (i.e, the beginning of a
task as opposed to the beginning of a phenom-
emon) assumes the following circumstance: an
individual mind wishes to intervene in a field of
rational activity. The historian is a ready
example: he wants to write a history of X and
therefore he must rationally find a suitable point
at which to start his formal work. This is by no
means a simple proposition, since in choosing a
beginning he confers upon it a certain status
based on its ability to intend the whole of what
follows from it. The specific characteristically
modern pressures affecting anyone making such
a choice are, first, his awareness that any such
choice is in large part arbitrary (since a real –
i.e., empirically verifiable, concrete beginning cannot be truly ascertained [...] and secondly, his awareness that his field – whether history, sociology, linguistics, literature, philosophy, the sciences – is disposed or laid out and ordered, not by calendars but according to structures or ordered internally by rules, sets, impersonal groupings. These pressures are different sides of the same coin. Together, they conspire to discourage beginnings. They constantly remind the individual worker that gone are the days when knowledge or artistic production could be considered essentially an outgrowth of specific events, beginning on a certain date, emanating from a particular person (Beginnings 50-51).

To begin means to enter a discourse that has already begun, a discourse that possesses its own norms of truth and value, and above all its own history. The beginning is enveloped by contingencies of various kinds, some drawing our attention to the beginner’s intentions, others to his
methods of procedure. Precisely the complexity of intention and method during a beginning makes the whole subject interesting. Said shows that great beginnings in literature and thought are often turbulent, directionally uncertain but subversive in its effect. The second chapter of the book ‘A meditation on the Beginnings’, deals with this turbulence and it is its main issue. This chapter leaves the reader with a fervent concern for the endless demand of creativity. Not only must the poet create by virtue of one critical beginning but as a philosopher he must take on the role of the ‘Perpetual beginner’ (48) starting ever and again his subjects, renewing themselves. This ceaseless mental strife is impressive enough but what makes it significant is its placement in a critical structure of intentionality and method. The beginning is formally a break with the past. It is a discontinuity in the flow of thoughts or events. The poet must accept the risk of rupture or discontinuity. For the writer, the historian or the philosopher the beginning emerges reflectively and perhaps unhappily, already engaging him in an awareness of its difficulty, knowing he will break with the past, including his
own, the poet of originality will suffer from a shaking uncertainty as to his task.

The central argument of this book is presented in Chapter Three “The Novel as Beginning intention.” This chapter shows how the novel has had to evolve from its classic format into its more recent ones. The early novels were largely formed on the plan of an individual life, be it *Don Quixote* or *Tom Jones*. This made the novel into a fictitious biography. The first novelists were convinced that such biographies had borders in an adequately believable time and place. Said discusses authors such as Dickens, Hardy and Conrad who experienced a post-romantic doubt in the viability of such models of fiction. A major shift in narrative art occurs with the appearance of an increasing novelistic interest in discontinuities which are evident in Dickens, Hardy and Conrad. In the case of Joyce the moment toward total discontinuity constitutes an entire career. Joyce was searching for a medium of ever increasing verbal flux. The novel as a life story loses more and more its original magic:

History and society seem (for Joyce) to have
forced upon the novel its supplementarity, to which the novelist's most effective answer is a very difficult art whose connections with reality are seldom obvious. This is the betrayal of art by society, according to Joyce, and the retaliation of art. Nevertheless, such a rationale does not exhaust the meaning of betrayal. The problem is the author-novelist himself, upon whom the pressure of the novel as institution weighs heavily. The novel's paternal role— to author, father, procreate a rival reality— appears to be increasingly a formal one. Authority gives way to repetition, as mimesis gives way to parody and innovation to rewriting. Each new novel recapitulates not life but other novels. It is not too much to say, I think that late-nineteenth-century phase of the novel I have been discussing can be characterised as one in which narrative loses the sense of beginnings with which it had commenced. And this is because
the author now considers himself as much a creation as his writing. (151–152)

In recent times the mere fact that an imaginative text has come into being often suggests the most taxing of human conditions. The authors seek to live in two increasingly incompatible worlds, that of daily life and that of his art.

To this matter Said devotes his fourth chapter, "Beginning with a Text". In this chapter he turns to the fact that texts exist and pre-exist unlike intentions which are only virtual. The main problem with texts is that texts like the Bible have unexampled prior authority but even their authority is being forever produced by their interpreter. Its authority is bound to its existential fact. The nexus of life and text is finally to be seen in the concept of a "career". The careers of modern writers also demonstrate that a text is no longer handed down stamped with original authority. But instead must ceaselessly be produced in the present traced with the marks of struggle. In a model of criticism that differentiate textual development from biological growth Said establishes four oppositions that structure modern careers. They
are: First, the opposition of career to non-career, the problem
of beginning. Conrad even after writing several books felt
the absence of a starting point; Second, the opposition the
writer senses between the right course and wrong course for
an ongoing career. That means the problem of what kind
of text one intends; Third, the opposition, innovation
and habit. This stresses the dangers of self parody. Then the
opposition of career and its end.

As such fractures are the stuff of modern literary
history, Said devotes a chapter "*Abecedarium Culturae*" to
the account of mainly French literary philosophy during
recent times. Foucault is the main figure in this gallery. One
could sense a deep affinity between Said and Foucault despite
all the difference in their subjects. He appreciates Foucault
for his avoidance of structuralist tendency to over determine
language. But Said goes beyond Foucault. Foucault’s power
game is confined to the western world and he overlooks the
economic, political and cultural exploitation of the East by
the West. In Foucault’s system individual authors do not count
for much; it is the collective body of text that is focussed
upon. Said on the contrary believes in the determining imprint of the individual writer upon the otherwise collective body of texts.

A last chapter, “Vico in His Work and This”, presents us with the inspiring model maker whose spirit breathes throughout the whole of *Beginnings*. Vico provides Said with a number of cardinal investigative principles. As the influence of Vico on Said, and especially on this book, has been referred to earlier, no much of dilation is attempted here.

*Beginnings* resists categorising. Said’s eclecticism makes it impossible for us to pinpoint its location. It is, for example, Marxist in the sense that its ultimate intention is to change the social, political and intellectual worlds, not merely to describe them. But it is not incompatible with a deep cultural conservatism which respects the work of such as Auerbach, Curtius, and Spitzer. Said is as much Vichian or Auerbachian as he is Marxist and in spite of his deep and acknowledged debt to Foucault, it would be, reductive to call *Beginnings* simply Foucauldian.
The genre of *Beginnings* is also difficult to define. It is not exactly a work of literary criticism, though it contains brilliant readings of works by Dostoevsky, George Eliot, Conrad, Hardy, Hopkins and others. Texts by non-literary writers like Nietzsche, Freud and Renan are however read in the same way. One of the aspects of *Beginnings* is to break down the traditional division between literary criticism on the one hand and the discussion of philosophical or psychological texts, on the other.

One of the chief arguments put forward by *Beginnings* is that a text should be detached from its authorial origin. But Said is caught in a paradox here. We can ask who is this ‘I’ who denies the authorial origin other than the author of *Beginnings* himself? In order to free the text from the “classical” notion of an authorial origin, he must use as an instrument of disarticulation, the concept he intends to deny. *Beginnings* must constantly reaffirm that concept of authoring, willing, intentional, productive self which its analysis of the “modern” revolution in the notion of the text denies. As Hillis Miller puts it,
The reader of a text, according to Said, and according to the theoretician of the text he most often cites, Michel Foucault should look for what can be said within the limits of a given "discursivity", and he should look for creative or enabling contradictions which make the text possible. In the case of Beginnings these generative contradictions have precisely to do with the central affirmations and denials of the book, with the constant affirmations and denials of the notion of the willing, productive, generative self with the constant affirmation and denial of the uniqueness of the "modern" period of literary and intellectual history, and with the constant recognition and denial of the fact that if the notion of 'beginning' is to be genuinely different from the notion of "origin", then it must be a beginning which can never begin except over the gulf of its own impossibility, that is, fictitiously, phantasmagorically. (4)
Beginnings constantly recognises these contradictions, without quite recognising them, in passages which are like slips of the tongue. One such passage appears on p.233:

Another necessary qualification is that whereas I am primarily discussing a period of about fifty years in European (particularly British and French) literary history – years that give rise to a radical rethinking of what it means to create a text – there are examples from other periods for which some of the modern examples are relevant. All writers have faced the problems of the conflict between coherent development, let us say, and the mere dispersion of energy. All writers, certainly from the Renaissance on have meditated in language upon the peculiarities of language. So while we can do cite examples from many periods in history, these fifty years provide us with a sustained examination of the issues at other times. Such writers as Wilde, Hopkins, Proust, James, Conrad and
T. E. Lawrence in their works and lives completely transform the text from an object to be gained into an unceasing struggle to be a writer into what Lawrence called “the everlasting effort to write.”

This passage does not look wholly coherent. The passage says simultaneously three incompatible things: 1) that the modern period (i.e. from about 1875 to 1925) witnessed a radical transformation in the older notion of a text; 2) that this opposition between two notions of a text (as an object to be gained and as production, is in fact a universal problem and appears in one form or another in any period of history; 3) that, it is not a universal problem and not something that appeared more or less suddenly in 1875, but something that appeared apparently with the Renaissance. Similar passages in Beginnings reveal momentarily the contradictions in its assumptions, that about the self, that about the distinctions between beginning and origin and the uniqueness of modernism.