theories and methodologies

A Concentrated Itinerancy

FOREST PYLE

IN THE PREFACE TO *AN AESTHETIC EDUCATION IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION*, HER REMARKABLE COLLECTION OF FIELD-DEFINING ESSAYS WRITTEN over a quarter century, Gayatri Spivak recounts how she retrospectively "discovered" an informing motif: the "distracted theory of the double bind." She briefly notes that "distracted theory" is a "poor but accurate translation" of *théorie distraite*, the term Derrida used in the preface to *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* to characterize the relation between that collection of occasional essays and his ongoing theoretical project (ix).

It is no accident that to "chart" the "intellectual trajectory" leading to her own project Spivak would turn to Derrida, the philosopher whose work is most inseparable from hers (3). In this context, it is instructive to see how Derrida arrives at his notion of distracted theory. The texts gathered in *Psyche*, he writes, "have accompanied, in some fashion, the works I have published over the last ten years. But they have also been dissociated from those works, separated, *distracted*." He elaborates on this relation with a military metaphor: the texts' distraction is "marked in their formation. A formation must move forward but also advance in a group. According to some explicit or tacit law, it is required to space itself out without getting too dispersed. If one were to make of this law a theory, the formation of these works would proceed like a *distracted* theory" (xii).

I understand why Spivak would be drawn to Derrida's notion of a distracted theory to characterize the composition and orientation of the writings in her collection. But as a reader of the volume I would propose that the essays proceed less like a distracted theory and more like a concentrated itinerancy. I call them this not because migrations and deportations are the topics of some of these essays or because "moving around" in languages as the prelude to translation is the topic of others (353). Rather, I believe that *concentrated itinerancy* best describes the course of the teaching and thinking represented in the twenty-five installments of this *Aesthetic Education*.

The global itinerary of the essays is announced in the title of the volume and is recorded in the sites of their delivery: Beijing, Dubai,

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Delhi, Cape Town, Sofia, Paris, and so on. As professionally established as Spivak has become at Columbia University—and as acutely as she reflects on her roles in that powerful institution—she continues to be an itinerant. And if she differs in almost every other way from those Wesleyan ministers who traveled their circuits, her version of itinerancy is, like theirs, devoted to a purposeful public teaching and speaking that in part is dedicated to asking "how one speaks abroad, and at home" (241). If there is no waywardness in Spivak's itinerary, it is not because she is motivated by a religious calling but because she directs an unwavering and self-critical attention to ethicopolitical responsibilities. In this sense Spivak's itinerancy is best described in terms not of distraction or dissociation but of concentration, as a gathering of forces or—to return to the military metaphor—as a bringing together of troops for the purpose of concentrating their strength. Forces converge on a common point; critical pressure or leverage is applied to a site.

The site on which Spivak's concentrated itinerancy converges is Gregory Bateson's version of the double bind. Her preface spells out the itinerary of the variations on this double bind she addresses in the twenty-five pieces in the volume. She begins with the most economical definition of the double bind: "learning to live with contradictory instructions" (3). I'm not sure, to invoke the title of one of her essays, when exactly for Spivak "the double bind starts to kick in" and thus to kick out aporia as the principal characteristic of the impasse of radical undecidability, a notion associated with the deconstructive orientations of Paul de Man and Derrida. To be sure, she continues to identify instances of aporia, such as the moment at the end of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in which the narrator's refrain—"It was not a story to pass on"—acquires in its third iteration an abyssal self-reflexivity of undecidability: "This is not a story to pass on" (274, 275). Spivak describes it in "Acting Bits / Identity Talk": "A death in the birth of a story that is not to translate or pass on. Strictly speaking, therefore, an aporia or unbridgeable gulf. And yet it is passed on, with the mark of untranslatability on it, in the bound book *Beloved* that we hold in our hands." She calls it "the most extreme example of the withholding of translation" (170, 169). To put the implications of Spivak's reading in the terms I am suggesting here, the concentrated force of rhetorical energies is such that the impasse is simultaneously a passage and the marking of an itinerary is at the same time its foreclosure.

I find Spivak's account of an aporia that implicates the ends and beginnings of *Beloved* to be as convincing in its formulation as it is rigorous in its reading. I also find intellectually compelling and pedagogically persuasive her observation in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* that the deconstructive mode of reading as "critical intimacy" demonstrates how aporia offers "the experience of the impossible" (427). But Spivak has long expressed impatience with the habit of a certain strain of deconstruction to dwell forever in the dead ends it identifies. "Perhaps *some* of the problems with *some* of what is recognizably deconstructive," she writes in *A Critique*, "has been a seeming fixation with the stalled origin and the stalled end; many names for *différance* and *aporia*" (175). The stunning aporia she identifies in *Beloved*—which she also addressed in "The Politics of Translation"—is the looped concentration of "the stalled end" *as* "the stalled origin."

There are many good and relevant reasons to look to Bateson's work in general and to his notion of the double bind in particular to find productive and cognate alternatives to the deconstructive fixation on aporia: his account of the conditions of aporetic undecidability, the infinite regress of "contexts," and the self-reflexive staging of the relationship between client and patient. But Friedrich Schiller is the real destination of Spivak's turn to Bateson. In the end, Spivak

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is interested in how those aspects of Bateson's project converge in his notion of "play" and its connection with Schiller's *Spieltraub* (*Aesthetic Education* 27). To get beyond what she perceives to be the "paralysis" of deconstructive accounts of aporia, Spivak uses Bateson's work as an example of "playing" that double bind, one that offers not so much a way out of the impasse as a way to play it differently. And by playing with Bateson to get to Schiller—by turning, in other words, from the rhetorical mode of aporia to psychology in order to arrive at an aesthetic education—Spivak "repeats" "Schiller's mistake" (19).

Readers familiar with *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* or with a deconstructive motif that originated in de Man's 1983 Messenger Lecture "Kant and Schiller" are likely to be surprised by Spivak's embrace of Schiller. It is one thing to declare, as de Man is reported by Andrzej Warminski to have done, that "[w]e are all Schillerians" (7)—especially since this would seem an admission of a failure inherent to the professing of literature—but it is quite another to honor Schiller's project with the title of a book. "I am a bit obsessed with Schiller," Spivak confesses in her introduction, and, tacitly acknowledging her own Schillerization of Kant, she goes on to acknowledge that she "intends"—and this intention is crucial—to repeat "Schiller's mistake," "transforming balance to an open series of double binds" (*Aesthetic Education* 19). For de Man, Schiller made more than one mistake in his use of Kant, but each of the mistakes is characterized by his impulse to turn a "problem" Kant's critique poses for philosophical understanding into a "solution" (*Aesthetic Ideology* 153). Kant "disarticulates" or "takes apart" the "tropological system of aesthetics" that he himself had "undertaken." De Man is left to cast about for the most accurate way to express this occurrence: "I don't know what expression to use—*you cannot say 'go beyond'*—he had interrupted, disrupted, disarticulated the project of articulation . . . which he had undertaken and which he found himself by the rigor of his own discourse to break down under the power of his own critical epistemological discourse" (134; emphasis added). Though this moment in the lecture appears extemporaneous, it is exemplary that de Man's own articulation begins to break down here, and it is instructive that while unsure about the best word to use, he is certain that one cannot say "go beyond." For de Man, this is not a moment—and certainly not a story—that one can pass on.

Which is precisely what Schiller does. Trying to be a good Kantian, he "revalorizes" the aesthetic, "setting up the aesthetic as . . . an exemplary category, . . . as a model of education" (de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* 130). Missing the disarticulations at work in Kant's *Critique*, Schiller transforms the aesthetic into a preeminent value: he humanizes, psychologizes, and aestheticizes Kant's critical philosophy. Spivak does not challenge de Man's reading: she revalorizes it. "Schiller was indeed wrong in his understanding of Kant. But," she asks, "who is exactly right? Schiller's problem was not that he was wrong, but that he did not run with his version of his wrong, as did Kant, as did Nietzsche, as did Derrida, in different ways" (*Aesthetic Education* 28). As she looks back in her introduction, Spivak finds there a pedagogical itinerary that in the "era of globalization" might run with Schiller's mistake. "The chapters in this book," claims Spivak, "are instances of such mistakes. . . . As I write, I begin to suggest more and more that the relationship of this style of reading with the Enlightenment is a taxonomy of 'mistakes.' Kant's intended, but managed; Schiller's unintended; ours intended and acknowledged; and all subject to the general taxonomic rule of future anteriority" (20, 21). She calls this unfinished trajectory of mistakes a "destinerrancy," and I propose that her "plea for an aesthetic education" "with an eye to the future anterior, exceeding one's grasp" (26, 367), is the manifestation of a concentrated

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itinerancy that might take us toward the problem of subalternity: "we must know what mistake to make with a specific text and must also know how to defend our mistake as the one that will allow us to live. I assume that the passing of a text into my grasp is a mis-take, of course. As we move toward the subaltern, we can only learn through mistakes, if that remote contingency arrives" (28).

If Spivak's destinerrancy of intended mistakes, wayward texts, and contingent arrivals seems a far cry from the poised idealism and confident humanism of Schiller's *Letters on Aesthetic Education*, it is because Spivak uses Bateson's notion of play more as a critical supplement than as a synonym for Schiller's *Spieltraub*. Schiller's "concept of play is a highly civilized concept," says de Man, and play in Schiller means not only "equilibrium, harmony" but also "*Spielraum*, the play, the space that you need in order to prevent the dialectical encounter from taking place. You need a little play between those two things. You need a little distance between them to keep them from colliding with each other." You need, in other words, a little margin or "play room" to prevent the two terms from entering into the gravitational pull of a double bind. "As such," concludes de Man, "play has that pleasant and reassuring and suggestive function" (*Aesthetic Ideology* 151). This is not the function that Spivak intends to suggest with her inflected notion of play, which in the work of Bateson is a way to make the encounter take place, a way back to the double bind. She "will attempt to shake the Schillerian balance into a double bind, by way of Bateson's treatment of 'Play'" (25). Play becomes a place for Spivak to concentrate her energies and "deconstruct Schiller from reversibility into double bind" (27). She tucked away in her notes to the book's introduction the most acute and economical way to characterize her relation to Schiller's project: "affirmative sabotage" (510n3).

The affirmative side of this sabotage is certainly the pedagogical side. If Schiller's version of an aesthetic education may seem something of a surprise, no reader can come away from Spivak's essays without being convinced by their concentration on a pedagogical relation that is made explicit, worked out, staged. For Spivak, "reading in 'pure' literary terms"—as she does "with Stuart Hall" in the essay by that name—is first and foremost a lesson in reading. Spivak is one of the most quotably epigrammatic critics since Oscar Wilde, but she shares with de Man, her teacher, an aversion to any form of aestheticism. "When I speak of art specifically my take is a schoolteacher's take," she writes in "Acting Bits / Identity Talk: "art and literature and music for me are audio-visual teaching aids in the construction of cases. Naive but useful if one is groping to state the question: what is it to learn?" (167). She is not invoking Schiller in this essay, and this is a naïveté of pedagogy, not poetry. But if criticism and teaching are necessarily conducted in a sentimental mode, Spivak's naive schoolteacher's take posits a relation between poetry and pedagogy that is the final stop on my compressed itinerary of this book.

If her embrace of Schiller will surprise all but a handful of those in the habit of reading Spivak primarily as a postcolonial critic, still fewer of those readers will recognize her invocation of the British Romantic movement as an early model for her thinking. Retracing her itinerary, Spivak remarks that "in the earlier stages we could find in British Romanticism our models" and proceeds to quote four long and well-known paragraphs from William Wordsworth's Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. By "earlier stages" I understand her to mean her early critical work on British Romanticism, exemplified in the essays on Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Mary Shelley she published in the late 1970s and early 1980s. If we think of Spivak's introduction as giving an account of her critical trajectory from its early stages in Romantic studies to its as-yet-unrepresentable "subaltern end,"

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which "cannot inform a university press book," the reference to Wordsworth can function as an acknowledgment of a formative, if long departed from, site on her itinerary. But if this were the role of the reference, she could have invoked merely key clauses ("the poet is a man speaking to men," "the poet should consider himself as in the situation of a translator," etc.), acknowledged Wordsworth's contribution to the ways in which the "aesthetic short-circuits" habit making (6), indicated the limits of his project (it is "deeply class-marked" and "deeply individualistic," etc. [6, 7]), and moved on to a more proximate critical or theoretical resource. Instead, Spivak stops and lingers at these old Wordsworth passages, quoting them at length—they are the longest stretch of quotation in the volume—*without subjecting them to a reading*. I understand this to be another version of her schoolteacher's take: presenting this Wordsworth as a resource, as a reading assignment of sorts for those of us who would learn from her.

Spivak offers a detailed syllabus of what one of this schoolteacher's courses might look like in "When the Double Bind Starts to Kick In." It involves "the training of the imagination that can teach the subject to play—an aesthetic education" (10). At the same time, her course also requires learning that "poetry coming out of the eighteenth or nineteenth century will not help the epistemico-epistemological crisis of globalization" (113). But she returns to the most Romantic of items—the imagination—as a resource for hope or as what in a different context de Man called "the depository of hopes that no other activity of the mind seems able to offer" (*Rhetoric* 17). Spivak does not propose the Romantic imagination as the resolution of the double bind. Rather, Wordsworth's, Coleridge's, and Percy Shelley's variations on this "faculty" open "an experience of the impossible" (113): "the literary imagination is programmed to fail but it can figure the impossible" (116). It is, in other words, an ethical destination—or perhaps a destinerrancy—for an aesthetic relation, and versions of it circulate like a refrain throughout the essays. "By definition," writes Spivak in "Reading with Stuart Hall in 'Pure' Literary Terms," "we cannot—no self can—quite reach the quite-other. Thus the ethical situation can only be figured in the ethical experience of the impossible. And literature, as a play of figures, can give us access to the experience" (352).

If Spivak's itinerancy has taken her thinking to a subalternity that beckons outside the covers of this book, it also takes her back to the Romanticism that constituted her setting out. In this aesthetic education of a diversified provenance, Romanticism belongs not only to a past it shares with European colonialism but also to a present—our own era of globalization—for which it returns as a depository of a hope. This hope, in its intractable embrace with doubt, is one of the gifts that Spivak's double bind bestows on our own itinerant route to some future anterior.

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