theories and methodologies

Masterly Maxims

MIEKE BAL

Reading Spivak

UNLIKE MOST OTHERS TEACHING (ENGLISH) LITERATURE, GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK IS INTIMATELY KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT PHILOSOphy, especially German. Her deep knowledge of Kant, Marx, and Gramsci is a red thread running through her many books. And, given her interest in what we call less and less happily "postcolonial" theory (the hesitation coming from an awareness of the problematic meaning of the prefix *post-*), her discussions of such canonical and inexhaustible philosophical texts never lose sight of the sociopolitical implications of the ideas gleaned from the encounter. Thus, she brings a philosophical tradition to bear on contemporary social issues of a keen actuality. This solid philosophical background does not make her texts always easy to read for literary and other cultural scholars eager to get ideas—preferably quickly—about "how to do" postcolonial literary studies. Spivak's work is as challenging to read, understand, and absorb as it is important in content.

"Difficult" writers have fascinated me for a long time. I feel torn between the wish, the imperative, to read their books and the daunting investment of time, concentration, and energy that the undertaking demands, an investment I feel inadequately equipped for. Such books have a feature in common, which may be connected to their difficulty. A passion *for* the book and its subject matter is mirrored by a passion *in* the book—a passionate character, style, or tone that overrules the simply laid-out argument, the linear logic, of standard academic work. The writer's passion contributes to the difficulty. To get access, then, the reader must bring another passion. Lacan, for example, I only managed to "get" when I decided to read his work as poetry. In Derrida I just follow the wordiness and take it as speech. Deleuze becomes easier to read once we decide, according to his view of language, to abandon the illusion of a distinction between literal and figurative uses of words. In Spivak my starting point is also to look for a mode of reading that makes the most of the difficult situation. You could call it a double bind, to use the key

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concept of Spivak's new book: you know you must read this, but you cannot, or you barely can dare to face the task. A double bind that, in accordance with Spivak's injunction, it is best to learn to live—enacting or performing it rather than merely understanding it.

In the end you read the book, or at least I did. It is worth the effort because the meandering tour through Western philosophy and (not only) Western literature is enriching on all levels, the more so because it is unorthodox in style and feminist in argument. I hope to show a bit of this below. Few academic writers manage to broach so many important cultural issues raised by the social world today, not only addressing literature but taking it as a serious participant in that world. Most important, Spivak's work moves so naturally between the political, ethical, and aesthetic domains that her ultimate promotion of the *epistemological* as the key to an aesthetic education almost passes unnoticed. And yet this is why education matters, is difficult, and is possible.

Instrumentalizing Reading

Spivak's books cannot be summarized. Even when she herself tries to summarize only the introduction to her recent *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), she does not give the kind of clear overview one seeks in a summary (26–27). A bit later, however, she reassures her readers by giving them license to do something usually considered improper: "Instrumentalize the essays that follow, then" (34). This advice does not mean harvesting half sentences for quotations to make one appear learned and politically savvy. It does not mean opportunistically appropriating only the ideas that suit one's own argument. Instead, instrumentalizing is searching for a mode of reading adequate to the book's major tenets.

In a response to Spivak's book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), I proposed that her prose is best read as speech, specifically the speech of a teacher who, committed to the students' education, is attentive to the wavering of eyes, the motion of hands writing notes, the pricking up of ears, and other signs of difficulty that call for a detour. When seen as the mode of a teacher, every deviation from the straight and narrow of logical exposition can be considered generous, interactive, and indispensable. The possibility of immediately attending to individual students' needs is the primary reason that live teaching is still essential even in universities, where students can read for themselves. What seems like challenging writing is the staging of a brilliant and committed teacher. I was inspired by Spivak's writing and felt justified in this figurative, personifying mode of reading her by her own use of figures to make intellectual points. She deploys the figure of the "native informant," for example, methodologically to articulate and qualify her "critically intimate" encounter with Kant. "Critical intimacy" is another of her figurations of her intellectual position (Bal, *Travelling Concepts* 286–323).

And here is my personal double bind. The new book, voluminous and challenging, demanding and enriching, cannot, in my view, be read productively through the figure of the teacher, primarily for the paradoxical reason that the author stages herself explicitly as a teacher. She initially defines her work in the phrase "of the classroom situation," and throughout the book that situation is extensively described. Her adventures in different teaching situations may have an interest of their own—certainly, they make her case for the differentiated yet always demanding job of teaching—but the figure has lost its figurativity; it no longer triggers the reader's imagination.

An additional paradox ensues: staging herself as a teacher across national and linguistic borders—identifying with the widely circulated image of her—by relating many anecdotes about teaching in India and Bangladesh, she deploys a memorial mode that has

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become popular in the United States. In the wake of feminism, postcolonialism, and other new movements that have had a decisive influence on the academic modes of thinking—and don't get me wrong: that influence was and is fabulous—this personal account passes as almost standard. In my view, however, this probing of personal memories in academic work has a drawback: when it is not carefully measured and monitored and slides toward particularity, it tends to cultivate an individualism poorly suited to teaching, one that may get in the way of the arguments. This personal mode works only when it contributes theoretically and analytically to the academic content. Otherwise, individualism takes over. In other words, the more "Indian" the figure of the teacher is on the level of anecdote, the more "American" her intellectual style becomes.

From this difference between these two books and my intuitive rejection of the teacherly mode of reading for the most recent one, I learned something that, I think, is crucial to Spivak's passionately pursued goal, metonymically indicated by her title. I learned that explicitness does not stimulate the imagination, while, as Spivak rightly insists, the latter is key to the aesthetic. Even a scholarly book has an aesthetic side to it, instrumental to the pleasure of reading it. And that pleasure is the royal road to readability. It so happens that the imagination is Spivak's major weapon against the hopelessness she keeps mentioning in her book. She provisionally defines it as "'thinking absent things,' hardly distinguishable from thinking" (16). Note the large share the imagination has in thinking. The teacher in *An Aesthetic Education* is not "absent." In reading this book, then, I looked for another mode in which to instrumentalize her text, a mode in accordance with her arguments and fulfilling the author's request for "interactive readers" (3).

A clue to the fresh ("absent") mode of reading comes up midway in the introduction, in a discussion of a double bind between two forms of philosophizing she detects in Kant. In this context she discusses the genre of the maxim. And since a maxim is a brief statement, so different from the book in front of me, this caught my attention in the epistemological-affective way that may lead to an entrance. A quotation from Kant on the subject of maxims leads the author to a development on the difficulty of translation—a brief and useful lesson on linguistic diversity and against simplification (14–15). A maxim is a short utterance given as a statement, a thesis, something like an internal, partial summary or an aphorism. I like to think of Adorno's *Minima Moralia* (1951). Maxims are subjective but not psychological—the latter qualification alludes to Spivak's "sabotaging Schiller" (2), a move necessary to the substantiation of her book's title.

In the intricate, meandering prose of Spivak's book, some phrases offer halting places because they sound like maxims—or at least I can instrumentalize them as such: short, succinct, clear, and programmatic. These phrases are invariably surrounded by extensive explanation or commentary, so that appropriation is not the last word on them. But in their succinct clarity, they are a tremendous help. Rather than close off ideas by appropriating a facile entrance into them, I propose to read this book through its maxims, using them not as slogans but as means to open the ideas up, read around them, and thus, instead of slavishly following the many-threaded text, weave my own web with them. The form or genre of the maxim is a metonym of a certain kind of philosopher, one who endorses the subjectivity of philosophizing. This is the figuration that opened this book up for me. Some examples are in order.

In a discussion of the translation of Kant's definition of maxims, we read that "a general assumption of continuous translatability is waylaid by the diachronic heterogeneity of our globe" (14). Food for thought: about translation—the focus of chapter 12;

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about globalization, discussed in many of the essays, albeit mostly sideways; about heterogeneity and the vexed parasynonym *alterity*, discussed with a lot of skepticism; and about time, the diachronic in the contemporary and all the issues surrounding that notion. These four subjects join forces in one short sentence to make up the nonlinear coherence of a book that is itself heterogeneous.

Now some examples from the first page. The first sentence of the introduction is a maxim of the rejected: "Globalization takes place only in capital and data." This immediately tells us that globalization is up for a deeply critical view and a search for alternatives. The announced subject of the book is "productively *undoing* another legacy of the European Enlightenment—the aesthetic." This is developed as the obligation to "look carefully at the fault lines of the *doing*, without accusation, without excuse, with a view to use" (both emphases added). This maxim makes crystal clear how this book does not follow the mode of ideology critique but gives critique a useful slant. The use in question turns out to be an "ab-use," a use "from below," playing on the Latin prefix *ab-* and its double meaning of "motion away" and "agency, point of origin" (3). This key concept is connected to another one, already in her 1999 book: the "intended mistake." This is the form ab-use takes: "ab-using this enlightenment is to expand the scope of this by an 'intended mistake': to bequeath a geography to it" (20). Here, with "geography," the contours of her alternative view of globalization begin to shimmer through. And then the most central maxim of all, which connects the two parts of the book's title: "learning the double bind—not learning about it" (3).

This is where the aesthetic education's "sabotaging" of Schiller's well-intended flattening of it through a simplistic psychologizing becomes possible and indispensable. What in *Critique* was still more or less positively formulated as critical intimacy is now a fiercer, more damning critical perspective; but, closer to deconstruction than to ideology critique, Spivak's argument will not give up on the Enlightenment—or on the use of English, asserting the need to teach Wordsworth, for example. For the value at the heart of that moment, mode, or vision of the meaning of teaching is the importance of learning, of learning to learn (9). And teaching, helping others to learn while learning from the (inter)activity, is Spivak's passionate commitment to the world. With her pessimistic view of education in the present, this puts her in a double bind.

Double Binds

Spivak takes the phrase *double bind* from *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972), a collection of essays by Gregory Bateson, an anthropologist (although his work encompassed many fields). Spivak's entire book—her entire life's work—is a plea for qualitative thinking to oppose the current predominance of quantitative reasoning. Hence, Bateson's effort to "understand childhood schizophrenia qualitatively" can be another maxim (Spivak 4). The double bind in childhood schizophrenia is that "both those whose life is enriched by transcontextual gifts and those who are impoverished by transcontextual confusions are alike in one respect: for them there is always or often a 'double take'" (Bateson 272; see also Spivak 4). Gift and confusion, placed side by side.

Spivak adopts this conception to open an infinite range of double binds. She sometimes only alludes to them and at other times discusses them at length in her book, mentioning two of the most important ones right away. These are the double bind between the abstract and the concrete, discussed by Bateson (186–87), and a related one, for Spivak a key one that makes globalization impossible and undesirable yet inevitable: "the universalizability of the singular" (4). Keep the word *geography* present here, as well as the critical take on glo-

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balization, "only in capital and data." But, as I mentioned, we are to learn (to live) the double bind, not learn *about* it. The universalizability of the singular is central to aesthetics as the facilitator of the imagination. Many of the double binds of postcolonial thinking—to begin with, the *post-* in this concept itself, as well as its key term *alterity*—are derived from or otherwise related to this central one.[1]

Here I stumbled on one of many convergences between Spivak's book and my own work. Having studied schizophrenia as the most resilient mark—or, rather, target—of alterity, I am interested in Bateson's comparison between enriched and impoverished subjects, both "schizophrenic," a term that the subjects in question tend to reject. Through my work on schizophrenia, which I began after working for a decade on migrants, I tried to come closer to what passes as alterity in "our own" cultural environment and see "madness" as culture- or context-transcending, to use Bateson's term. I can imagine that Spivak's shift from "postcolonial reason" to "aesthetic education" is at least partly inspired by a similar desire: to overcome the divisions any notion of alterity enhances. Indeed, without "globalizing" people into homogeneity, throughout the book she resists attempts to qualify them in terms of otherness. Instead, she "universalizes singularity."[2]

Another double bind lurking in Spivak's discussion of Bateson directly impacts her book. Education is, or involves, training, and the double bind of education is the fact that habits—the desired result of training—are first and foremost ways to avoid the need to question. One forms habits to not have to question one's premises repeatedly. This goes against the educational goal of critical thinking. Two of Spivak's favorite tools for living this double bind rather than smoothing it out are "deep language learning," the subject of her book *Death of a Discipline* (2003), and, recurring through all her work, translation. But, more centrally, the paradoxical way to live this double bind lies in the imagination. It is in this respect that Bateson's plea for training the imagination links up with Spivak's investment in literature, the motivation for her professional work.

Absent Things

An aesthetic education, according to an early maxim, trains students "at all cost to enter another's text" (6). Another, if not othered, is best sought in fiction—which is why Spivak, in spite of her pessimism, continues to labor for education in literature. Fiction is "that space that allows us to survive in the singular and the unverifiable, surrounded by the lethal and lugubrious consolations of rational choice" (2). Later she justifies this conception in another helpful maxim: "An 'as if' structure is as much error as truth" (17). Some of her chapters are titled alluringly in this manner. But work with *as if* is not demonstrated in "How to Read a 'Culturally Different' Book," where I expected it. In my view, this chapter plays into the hands of prejudice, with temple dancing and its dubious link to prostitution on the level of story and with an appeal to anthropological analysis in terms of method. I did not learn any how-to clues there. The chapter where all these ideas come together in a practice of reading does not contain *reading* in its title. The absent term *literary* is best substantiated in chapter 15, "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee and Certain Scenes of Teaching."

In a brief but illuminating analysis of passages in J. M. Coetzee's much discussed 1999 novel *Disgrace*, Spivak demonstrates not only her mastery of literary analysis but also her unique and bold way of making literary analysis, *as such,* relevant to ethics and politics. Her method: to imagine "absent things." The device is simple. She notices that in Coetzee's novel the narration keeps the focalization systematically away from the main character's daughter, Lucy, a rape survivor. *Focalization* is a key term in any narrative analysis. "What if,"

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asks Spivak, we imagine the absent focalization of Lucy? This device enables her to come up with an interpretation that does justice to the feminist necessity to bring the woman character to life, as well as "explains" how Lucy can take the position she does toward the postapartheid (with the same qualms about *post-*) situation in which her rape happened.

The logic of this move is convincing in that the absence of a focalization, as I have argued many times (most explicitly in *Death and Dissymmetry*), is as much a feature of a narrative text as its presence; "who cannot focalize?" is as important a question as "who focalizes?" Deciding to invent Lucy's focalization turns a reader into an interactive one, the kind Spivak seeks to enlist for her own text. What she calls "the nestling of logic and rhetoric" brings the ethical, the epistemological, and the political together, in a tense but solid entanglement (317). The knot consists of a readerly act of tracing intertextuality, "working both ways" (319). The reader must restore reference "in order that intertextuality may function . . . and . . . *create* intertextuality as well" (318; emphasis added). This quotation comes from a discussion of Rabindranath Tagore and Mozart, but it prepares us for the Coetzee analysis.

Is the creation of Lucy's focalization not a breach of the textual grounding of interpretation? No, since the literary text "gives rhetorical signals to the reader, which lead to activating the readerly imagination" so that no reader has to be submissive and be "content with acting out the failure of reading" (323). In fact, the text provokes such disobedience by means of rhetoric that restricts focalization too emphatically to the character under ethical scrutiny. Spivak calls this readerly response to the text's provocation *counterfocalization*. Like all opposition, such acts are bound to the text they counter. In one of her masterly maxims, she says, "This provocation into counterfocalization is the 'political' in political fiction—the transformation of a tendency into a crisis" (324). A note about Marx inevitably follows. The *literary* act of interactive reading is a site where the political can happen. Spivak makes this specific when she writes with utmost clarity while shunning facile simplification, "It is precisely this limited validity of the liberal white ex-colonizer's understanding that *Disgrace* questions through the invitation to focalize the enigma of Lucy" (326). The importance of this invitation goes beyond the feminist aspect (that of focalizing the woman character and her typical woman's plight). Spivak brings the different political elements together: "If we, like Lurie [the protagonist and Lucy's father], ignore the enigma of Lucy, the novel, being fully focalized precisely by Lurie, can be made to say every racist thing" (326).[3]

I cannot do justice to the intricate arguments here (contained in a mere five pages out of six hundred [322–27]) and only evoke them to guide the reader to a passage where one can learn (to live) the double bind, to teach the interactive reading that alone makes it possible to stay in the double bind of training without smoothing it over and without ceasing to question one's premises. This at its strongest is a version of the aesthetic education Spivak promotes as a tool of ab-using the Enlightenment and one of its current disastrous consequences, globalization, as something contemporary. But the contemporary, like aesthetics and globalization, is not a subject of analysis in this book. I miss elaborations of her key terms. But if I accept the maxim master as the figuration of the book's textuality, then I must construct these concepts, their counterparts, and their aftereffects myself.

Notes

1. I take the liberty of referring here to the introduction of my book *Of What One Cannot Speak*, in which I discuss the need for singularity as an alternative to particularity.

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2. My work on schizophrenia was done in collaboration with the psychoanalyst Françoise Davoine and has led to a film, *A Long History of Madness* (2012), and installations, made with Michelle Williams Gamaker (see crazymothermovie.com). The Britain-based international association Hearing Voices Network explains why patients and ex-patients reject the term *schizophrenia*.

3. Spivak refers here to two of the many essays on Coetzee's novel that wonder about this aspect because they don't dare make that bold Spivakian move (McDonald; Attwell).

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