theories and methodologies

The Postcolonial Aesthetic

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POSTCOLONIALISM EMERGED AS A FIELD WITHIN LITERARY STUDIES DURING THE 1980S AS PART OF THE DISCIPLINE'S GENERAL RESTRUCTURING. That restructuring has, perhaps, been insufficiently acknowledged by the profession, and at any rate there seems to be little consensus as to its significance and shape. But it seems undeniable that, during the 1980s, literary criticism ceased to ground itself on its attention to its objects' literary qualities or on its efforts to establish convincing literary judgments about them. It turned rather to thinking about literature as, for instance, a vehicle of cultural-political identities, or as a resistance to ideology, or, more neutrally, as articulated into broader signifying or social structures.

Postcolonialism found its place in this new regime as the study of literature *sub specie* empire. It emerged at a confluence of different trajectories. Perhaps most important, it appeared in the wake of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which, loosely drawing on Foucault's understanding of the power/knowledge relation, first effectively politicized the West's scholarly representations of its others—in this case, of the East. Said was aware that he was joining various trajectories, which, as it turned out, were soon to provide postcolonialism with its conditions of emergence. These included (1) the theoretical writings that supported decolonization struggles and policies during the 1950s, most notably those by Frantz Fanon; (2) the French intellectual response to the Algerian war, in particular as published in *Les temps modernes*; (3) the long history of Marxist critique of imperialism; (4) the Gramscian analysis of race, representation, and governmentality in Britain presented by Stuart Hall and others connected to the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, especially in the volume *Policing the Crisis* (1978); (5) the new understandings of slavery that emerged in the United States alongside the civil rights movement; (6) the transformation of "Commonwealth literature" as a field in the wake of Britain's 1973 entry into the European Common Market, whence, indeed, the term *postcolonialism* was first used in its current sense.[1]

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But these streams were only widely recognized as constituting a single field when, around 1985, literary analysis in a deconstructive mode was brought to bear on a political understanding of Western colonialism and global domination. This move was carried out most successfully by Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak. At any rate, Bhabha's and Spivak's contributions (along with Said's arguably less strong post-*Orientalism* work) came to define the field. There were several reasons for Bhabha's and Spivak's prominence and quick ascent to stardom. It was not just that their work was more ambitious, more imaginative, more subtle, and more in tune with the intellectual times than anyone else's. (It would be interesting to measure its external resonances by comparing Bhabha's work of the time with Stephen Greenblatt's: they appear to share core concepts.) It was also able to draw on a more varied and unfamiliar archive, in large part because Spivak and Bhabha were born in, and remained connected to, the Indian subcontinent and so retained a sharp sense of imperialism's history and continuing force. At the same time, they worked close to intellectual centers, where they had early and good access to au courant and philosophized concepts, which mattered at a time when the discipline was unusually welcoming to theoretical innovation.

Postcolonialism developed a specific set of relations to colonialism. I have argued elsewhere that Bhabha's work represented a break with earlier anticolonialist thought in that its key concepts—"mimicry" and "hybridity" in particular—were reconciliatory rather than oppositional in their understanding of the relation between colonizers and the colonized ("Postcolonialism and Globalisation"). The same cannot be said of Spivak, who has continued to insist on her oppositionality. But her Derridean understanding of difference and her use of European philosophy's technical vocabulary, along with her strong sense of how she is socially and institutionally positioned in relation to her topics and readerships, distanced her from more immediately political work in postcolonialism, including Said's interventions on Palestine. Hers has been mainly an oppositionality of the study, the lecture hall, the convention.

Thus, Spivak's famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) reduced political possibilities by insisting that the subaltern can indeed speak but not to us—that is, not to her essay's implied readership. The distance between "us" and "them" was so great, the various kinds of translation and connection required for us to hear the subaltern other were so far from being in place, that the subaltern was effectively silenced. And that analysis was addressed to at least a double audience: on one side, the metropolitan academy interested in theory; on the other, the Kolkata intellectual left at a time when West Bengal was governed by an alliance under the Communist Party against a background of continuing Maoist (or Naxalite) insurgency on behalf of local Adivasis (tribal peoples) and supported by urban, intellectual fellow travelers, including the Subaltern Studies group in its original iteration.

In Spivak's case what took the place of practical contestation appears to be, first, a disinclination to jettison any of the methods and interests that had shaped her. This meant that she was simultaneously (impossibly?) a deconstructionist, a Marxist, a feminist, and a postcolonialist whose work was designed to circulate across past colonial divides. Second, she insisted on her work's pedagogical force, again across many settings. She presented herself not just as a radical, a theorist, and a critic but also as a teacher. Third, as I say, she emphasized the institutional basis and setting of intellectual work, including her own, so that her place as a woman, a caste Hindu from Bengal, and an immigrant working in the higher reaches of the United States academy became integral to her analysis.

This eclectic, intensely self-conscious framework has enabled complex, allusive work that joins categorical position taking to

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argument (indeed, tends to crowd argument out with position taking) in ways that may test the limits of coherence and clarity (and for that reason are difficult to engage and assess) but at the same time has been remarkable for its intelligence and its refusal to cut theoretical or institutional corners.

An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization, a collection of talks and essays from the last ten years or so, is marked by all the qualities I just mentioned. But it also signals a shift toward a certain conservatism, or at any rate it consolidates such a swerve that was already noticeable in her *Death of a Discipline*, a decade ago. Characteristically, however, Spivak makes this conservative turn without jettisoning the oppositional, eclectic, feminist, deconstructive-philological, position-taking strands that her work has long gathered together.

Thinking of her work both as a professor at Columbia and as a founder of (and sometime teacher in) schools for tribal children in remote West Bengal, Spivak appeals for an "aesthetic education" somewhat as Schiller defined it in his postrevolutionary (1795) *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen, in einer Reihe von Briefen* (*On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*). I say "somewhat" because her turn to aesthetics has unexpected features. To begin with, she thinks of an aesthetic education as transmitting knowledge rather than experience as Schiller and aestheticism generally do. Or, rather, she thinks of an aesthetic education as enabling an "epistemic transformation" despite its acknowledgment of a "fracturing of reason" (45, 133). It is, she contends rather opaquely, a "training of imagination for epistemological performance" (122). At the same time it is not, in the Kantian-Schillerean sense, universalizing. It is situated, and it may even help create new collectivities. But it does stand against cultural and religious localisms, including the cultural-religious nationalism powerfully present in India.

What does this mean in practice? Spivak's aesthetic swerve turns out to gesture toward what we might call a comparativist Althusserianism. If I understand her examples and arguments correctly, literary texts, as taught by a critical and aesthetically oriented teacher, open up possibilities for "alienation" from dominant social and ideological structures (37), and they do so because, as aesthetic objects in something like the way Schiller understood the aesthetic (they are singular objects that attract a "play drive's" attention [Schiller 107]), they may solicit readers' "consent."

This alienating but consensual pedagogy may take several forms, most of which involve either comparison (comparing texts, especially in different languages, so as to expose students to the play of difference, otherness, and closure across societies and cultures) or what we used to call "reading against the grain," roughly as envisaged in Louis Althusser's brilliant 1966 essay "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract" (although Althusser is not mentioned in the book), which, through its concept of "determinate absence," was an inspiration of one stream of 1980s theory. All this is, as I say, surprising because it is hard to imagine any thinker more antagonistic to Schiller than Althusser: his essay denounces the aesthetic understanding of art. And, of course, Schiller is a founder of the form of progressive humanism that was Althusser's main target across his career. In the end Spivak hedges her bets between Althusser and Schiller. That's because she wants to join "imagination" (Schiller) to "epistemology" (Althusser). But it is also because she concedes that an aesthetic education successfully transmits critique only where it also forms a channel for upward social mobility, and in that way it solidifies a system based on unfreedom just by eliciting critical and imaginative freedom. That is a local form of what Spivak calls the "double bind of Enlightenment," which she regards as structuring modernity. So Spivak's aesthetic education, unlike Schiller's,

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is an education into limits and impossible choices. It is, in the technical sense, tragic.

This truncated account of Spivak's contribution is intended as a basis for two questions I would put to *An Aesthetic Education*—questions that are also niggles.

It is, I think, fair to observe that the history of aesthetic education is not a particularly successful one. Even to make this observation from within literary studies is, however, to risk papering over a difficulty. Because if the categories of literature and the aesthetic are taken *stricto sensu*, then they are not just different from each other but in tension. The aesthetic is fundamentally sensory while literature is linguistic. That is why twentieth-century literary criticism was based on concepts and techniques that broke with aestheticism. These included the close reading of passages and the comparison of texts, the privileging of concreteness over abstraction and the subsequent recognition of what T. S. Eliot famously called "objective correlatives," the understanding that the literary public was a minority section of wider reading publics and that criticism trained readers to be part of a minority culture. And, last, the tragic understanding of cultural modernity that Spivak (like many of us) has inherited, constituted around losses, double binds, and impasses.

This form of literary criticism was invented by Eliot, developed in one direction by I. A. Richards, and institutionalized by F. R. Leavis and the *Scrutiny* group. It nonetheless shares with idealistic aesthetics of the kind inaugurated by Schiller, first, a politics that rejects modernizing democratic-capitalist instrumentality, deracination, and abstraction and finds rescue in art and literature and, second, a sense that, despite divisions in the public sphere, art and literature solicit consent and enjoyment, which form the basis of their collectivizing capabilities.

All this, I hope, helps us see that Leavisism has not just trodden where Spivak would now go but provides a template for her project. As Christoper Hilliard points out in his recent *English as a Vocation: The* Scrutiny *Movement*, Leavisism was disseminated across the British Commonwealth, including into the Indian subcontinent, which is today the only place in the world where it retains a presence. (Was Spivak trained in it as an undergraduate?) The usual perception of colonial Leavisism is that it was an instrument of British hegemony. As Simon Gikandi has noted, it "naturalized difference" by insisting on a small anglophone canon (651). And while that no doubt was usually the case, it was also used to provide less elite readerships with guidance in and standards for writing in local languages and so to provide the terms on which such writing could be recognized as literature. As one example of this, let me adduce K. Ayyappa Paniker's 1967 essay on Uroob's (i.e., P. C. Kuttikrishnan's) Malayalam-language novel *Ummachu* (1954). Paniker uses Leavisite criteria to distinguish *Ummachu* from "cheap sentimental or melodramatic stuff or just unadulterated political journalism" and then to show how "*Ummachu* helped to change the taste of the [Malayalam] reading public by offering a new conception of the nature and function of literature in social life" (178). In this context it is worth remembering that Leavisism also produced pedagogy for outsiders, perhaps most notably in David Holbrook's once influential *English for the Rejected* (1964). But Holbrook did not suppose that teaching literature could effect "epistemic transformations." He thought it might unleash creativity.

It may be that this history matters little to Spivak's project. But, at least from where I sit, it would be helpful for her to acknowledge it as a (highly developed) rival predecessor of the theories she presents here and, by the same stroke, to reflect more carefully on her (unacknowledged) attempt to join Althusserianism to modernist literary criticism, not least because, as Leavisism, that criticism became the most powerful form of literary and counterhegemonic pedagogy that the British Commonwealth knew.

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My second query concerns the history of European literature. That history is, of course, marked by breaks and transformations. Like many, I'd argue that probably the single most significant such shift was the advent of modernism, around 1910. One problem with this bold assertion, however, is that European modernism is not a unified formation: Franz Kafka's work, for instance, shares little except a generation with Katherine Mansfield's or Virginia Woolf's.

This matters most to *An Aesthetic Education* in relation to Spivak's reading of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999). Spivak's reading of the novel is powerful. She understands it as a father-daughter story with Shakespeare's *King Lear* as one intertext (321–24) and Kafka's *The Trial* as another. Against that background Spivak argues that the novel asks us to "counterfocalize" it—to imagine its events not from the perspective of its central character, David Lurie, but from that of his daughter, Lucy.

David Lurie is a professor of communications who, with minimal consent, seduces an undergraduate and is dismissed from his university in the Cape when he refuses to confess to the committee adjudicating a charge of sexual harassment against him. He goes to stay with Lucy, who owns a small homestead in the Karoo and is helped out by her neighbor Petrus, an African who, under apartheid, was her hired hand. One afternoon she is raped by three passersby, one of whom turns out to belong to Petrus's extended family. Lucy becomes pregnant and, although (because?) she is traumatized, decides to give birth. More than that: against her father's will but to protect herself against further violence, she agrees to become Petrus's wife, signing over her farm to him in exchange for the inviolability of her house and body. At the end David seems to be coming to terms with the situation. This is symbolically signaled by his joining a friend of Lucy's in an animal welfare group and committing himself to euthanizing unwanted or sick dogs, especially one he has come to care for.

Among much else, the novel is an allegory of the postapartheid state. In that context Spivak thinks that Lurie sees "the end of civil society" as imminent and that in his turn to loving dogs he is "staged as unable to touch either the racial or the gendered other." Lucy, on the other hand, is "casting aside . . . the affective value-system attached to reproductive heteronormativity" by agreeing to marry a man who is not father of her child and with whom she will not have sex. And she also sets out to live in a new collectivity, a scary "beginning with [Lear's] nothing," as Spivak phrases it (322–24).

But, Spivak argues, despite its sympathetic hovering over Lurie's shoulder, the novel is actually "a provocation" compelling the reader to form a "counterfocalization" that politicizes Lurie's rejection of the postapartheid settlement. In other words, Lucy's point of view is the text's Althusserian determinate negation, which charges the novel with a utopian progressive political force that it otherwise lacks.

This exhilarating Althusserian reading is not in any way *mistaken*: there are no criteria or rules on which to base such a judgment. But it is insensitive to the novel's modernism, to what it inherits from Kafka. To uncover what I mean by this, let us backtrack a little. In his essay on Leonardo Cremonini, Althusser argues:

> Cremonini leads us to the idea that the "mystery" of the "inwardness" of a painter, of his "creative project," is no more than his work itself, that the relations between a painter and his "work" are nothing but the "relations" he "paints." Cremonini makes us see the relations between things and their men. At the same time, he makes us see not the relations between the painter and this work, which have no *aesthetic* existence, but the relations between a "work" and its painter, which are at the same time, the relations between that work *and us*. (158)

This complex passage shifts emphasis away from the artist's (aesthetic) relation to his or her work and toward the work itself, which

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is granted roughly equivalent relations to its producer and its consumers. Thought like this, the work may form relations that its creator does not intend in the aesthetic (or Michael Fried-ian) sense.

Such a work-centered approach is familiar, and Spivak calls on it in her reading of *Disgrace*. But in Althusser, at least, it also belongs to the modernist trajectory that in literature was first worked through by Kafka and continued by (among many others) Coetzee. Here the literary work makes no claim to aesthetic expressivity, trusting that if it is sufficiently neutral, sufficiently outside the apparatuses of subjectivity, sufficiently immanent, it will, in unpredictable and uninterpretable ways, nonetheless reveal the world outside itself.

Kafka developed a literary form for writing like this. One of its key elements was to focalize a third-person, matter-of-fact narration through a passive central character who, living aslant degradation, had few or no beliefs, little or no affective disposition, little or no substance or personality at all—who was subjectively empty.

In *Disgrace* Lurie's refusal to confess to the committee enacts this kind of modernist neutrality, in an act that is allegorical of the novel's own protocol and, indeed, of the ethic affirmed by Coetzee in his ex cathedra writings. Lurie's refusal to confess bears witness to his sense of himself as living outside the regimes of normative subjectivity. And his refusal is more or less matched by Lucy, who refuses to tell her father what she thinks and feels in relation to her rape. Indeed, she refuses to talk her trauma through to anyone. So, like her father, she is simultaneously a Kafka-lineage modernist character and a thematization of such a character. There is nothing in her to focalize through: that is the point. Certainly she stands against Spivak's reading, which imagines her feeling the kinds of things that Spivak believes women in her position would feel and, thus, serving as a mouthpiece for Spivak's politics.

So—and let me leave it here—modernism in this lineage seems to be a problem for Spivak. It can't absorb the training of the imagination and the "epistemic transformation" that she conceives, except through interpretative violation. A number of questions follow this analysis: How globally transportable is this kind of European modernism? What reading techniques are proper to it for postcolonialism, if Spivak's aren't? What follows if we accept, as Kafka's and Coetzee's fictions do, that the impasses and double binds of modern society press in more narrowly than Spivak supposes, so that some of the most compelling and truth-telling literature of our time doesn't engage with subjectivization or social justice at all? Is modernism closer to the true than postcolonialism?

Note

1. The first such usage is probably in my own "Postmodernism or Postcolonialism?"

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