An Ethics on the Run

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak repeatedly casts herself as "only a literary critic." The two strands of her work that I focus on here—ethics and education—perhaps allow that self-formulation, modest and inadequate as it may be, to carry the burden of a Spivakian critical weight. Long before one heard rumors about the turn to ethics and the implications of such a turn, long before one heard about an ethics of reading, about ethics as praxis and principle, about seeing and doing ethics otherwise, Spivak was articulating an ethics of alterity.

A Spivakian methodology hinges on the following: acknowledging complicity, learning to learn from below, unlearning one's privilege as loss, working without guarantees, persistently critiquing the structures that one inhabits intimately and that one cannot say no to, and giving attention to subject formation such that it "produc[es] the reflexive basis for self-conscious social agency" ("Not Really" 153).

For Spivak the epistemological conundrum of knowing the other has most recently turned on the notion of a "planetary alterity" in the name of a "just" modernity. Urging us to rethink responsibility as a right rather than an obligation, Spivak is engaged not so much in reimagining the planet as in reimagining the globe as a planet where planet is "a catachresis for inscribing collective responsibility as right" (*Imperatives* 56). To sustain an ethical practice of reading that will be attuned to the lessons needed for transnational literacy, Spivak turns to the making of an "ethical singularity"—an encounter with the other where responses flow from both sides, each recognizing that there will always be something that does not get across—an ethics on the run, never quite adequate to its purpose but necessary all the same.

My comprehension of an ethics of singularity is best illustrated in engagements with literary texts where writers, characters, and readers contend with their own production as other while encountering other(ed) subjects in a continuous negotiation with the effects and affect of subject formations in particular places. There is pleasure and pain in the ease with which I can move between a character as failed reader in a text and my position as better reader to articulate a pedagogical practice of reading that points to a sense of achievement even as it acknowledges the necessary failures of that accomplishment—what Spivak has called the impossible intimacy of the ethical. This kind of collective responsibility as right seems to me clearly charted even in the murkiest of literary waters, leaving readers feeling more assured about their ethics of reading. The scene of education is ripe with and for such ethical encounters in keeping with the process of learning to learn.

I turn to one of Spivak's earliest pieces, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," for an analysis of such scenes of education. In the original essay and its revised and contextualized reinscription in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* the main analytic thread that connects the various texts is a charting and critique of the idea of "soul making" central to the imperialist mission. Soul making in its very articulation carries with it the possibility and impossibility of what it offers to the colonized. The civilizing mission seeks to make a subject of the colonized through soul making by drawing attention to that alterity. Soul making hinges on Spivak's reading of Kant's categorical imperative, "conceived as the moral law given in pure reason," which ratifies man as an end in himself and thus refuses to see man and every rational creature as a means to an end. This Kant is for Spivak a "metonym for (the) most ethical moment in the European eighteenth century" (*Critique* 123), a moment travestied in the imperialist project and in the present discourses of "development." In other words, the savage, the heathen, the under/less/developing/developed, the "raw man" (in Kant), is a limit case for the civilizing mission that seeks to make the other into a human, throwing into relief the violence of the subject-constituting project of imperialism.

The violence of subject constitution is key to understanding much of Spivak's work. As we move from imperialism to neoimperialism to globalization and development (the chapter "Lit-

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erature" in *Critique* includes readings of other texts such as Devi's *Pterodactyl* and Coetzee's *Foe*), the idea of soul making through education does not so much disappear as get rewritten and transformed through a painstaking "supplementation of collective effort by love," where the collective effort is directed to changing things on the ground—laws, systems of education, health care—and encouraging love or "the mind-changing one to one responsible contact" as that which could attenuate the violence of subject constitution ("Cultural Talks" 340). How does one participate in this scene of education? The answer seems to lie in a constant and inventive poiesis and the desire for learning to learn. Spivak describes such scenes of interaction and provides self-reflexive commentaries on them in her analysis of rural Indian and Chinese systems of education in interviews with Barlow and Sharpe. However, the question that keeps coming back to haunt me is whether such a poiesis, even when grounded not in transcendent claims but in the ways these claims are read by and have meaning for others, can help us move from the emphasis on individual interactions to an articulation of collective responsibility as right. Might we not slip back to the mode of soul making in and through violence? While the literary text provides for an on-site mediation, I worry about mediation in the one-to-one encounter Spivak articulates for the channeling of love.

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Influences: Death of a Discipline *and African Literary Studies*

In a world now as global as that envisioned by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), we begin at last to theorize world literature. How can such theorization move Africanists productively beyond their bases in national literature and area studies units? Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003) proclaims the demise of a form of comparative literature that came out of Romance and German philological traditions, and it lays the groundwork for a global philological tradition, which might rise, phoenixlike, out of its predecessor's ashes.

Spivak proposes a politics of reading: intellectual and moral seriousness requires our knowledge of the languages and literatures of the global South. *Death of a Discipline* is an homage to close reading through—never around—the forest of cultural difference. In particular, it acknowledges the value of thick description and deep cultural knowledge as critical resources that most fully open the riches of a literary text. This model makes literature of the global South fundamental rather than marginal, and yet nothing except Spivak's political and literary commitment underpins her insistence on foregrounding a southern perspective. As in her elegant reading of the density of reference and allusion in *A Room of One's Own*, imperialism and colonialism are themes she returns to again and again: the violence, the misprision, and the attempt to imagine through and beyond.

In her call for a new methodology, in her insistence on the riches that close reading in a literary language offers the educated, attentive, and creative reader, Spivak makes an appeal to the German *Weltliteratur* ("world literature") of Goethe, the first champion of global comparative literature. She does not use this term, and her refusal to do so comes straight up against another voice in the current conversation about comparative literature, that of Franco Moretti in "Conjectures on World Literature." Moretti's proposed model of study, a sociology of the novel, is unapologetically totalizing, inherently

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