



An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization

Review by CHRIS SCHREINER

An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012. 607 pp. \$35.00 (hardcover); \$19.95 (paperback).

This colossal intellectual effort, a plea for the indispensability of aesthetic education in the cultivation of world citizens, is a *Moby-Dick* of postcolonial literary conscience. Such an allusion, redolent of shipwreck and vainglory, is intended as respectful, although the phrase “*Moby-Dick* of --” here suggests an irreducible impression clouded by a sort of upscale cognitive dissonance, the psychic outcome in this reader of whatever Gayatri Spivak’s book accomplishes and fails to accomplish by blending as much philosophic and ethnically distinct material as it does. To associate Spivak’s book with *Moby-Dick* is to suggest that it is both *forward looking*--like the pure idealists who dream in the crow’s nest of Melville’s *Pequod*--and *doomed from the start*.

Gayatri Spivak is one of the only English professors in the world whom one can trust to write and lecture cogently on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), which is considered by many scholars to be the most difficult book ever written. This is an odd thing to say about Spivak, but one has to savor such distinctions when speaking of English professors. The back cover of her book modestly claims she is “the world’s most renowned critical theorist.” To give you an idea of the scope of her knowledge and ambition, an earlier book of Spivak’s almost as long as this one was titled *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999). In other words, she sees herself in the company of intellectual giants, more particularly in the tradition of those who practice *critique* in the Kantian sense. She was the first woman to receive her doctorate with Jacques Derrida, and remains one of the most interesting minds of her generation, a globe-trotting Comparative Literature scholar who teaches at Columbia University, publishes critical treatises, and trains elementary school teachers in West Bengal, India, in the vast multilingual country to which she traces her ethnic roots and partly (because she is hybrid) her sense of belonging, shared with the United States. She describes her complex multilingual identity as a “decolonized sub-continental.” She also says, “I teach in New York in the most powerful university in what some call the most powerful city in the world” (297). So she is aware of her origins and of her academic prestige and power, and she never lets us forget about them. About the only thing not directly within her force-field is art, which is something sovereign yet evanescent, a receding oasis that beckons with its otherness, its transformative power. Art haunts Gayatri Spivak because it escapes her authority and power in its talismanic essence as an original experience.

Spivak's *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* is a work that appreciates the value of aesthetic ways of knowing but is itself seldom artistic. As a thinker she is critically astute, but swaths of her theoretical prose are only accessible to the handful of her privileged peers who came through graduate school readily grasping the joyless duo of Karl Marx and Paul de Man. It follows that anyone who buys this book to receive an aesthetic education will be disappointed; Spivak is much too busy theorizing. Spivak's title suggests the humanizing experience of the fine arts as conceived by Friedrich Schiller in his *Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), but Schiller's aesthetic theory is not prominent in these pages. If you check the index, you will see that Schiller has a much lighter footprint than Kant, Derrida, Marx, Marxism, Gramsci, Gregory Bateson, Nationalism, Subaltern Studies, Comparativism, Annish Kapoor, and Rabindranath Tagore. Who is qualified to comment on all the above except Spivak? To finish reading her sweeping, arid, clever, and densely argued book does not automatically earn anyone the right to critique it or assess its worth and merit. One can at best clarify its guiding arguments and see if her book meets the challenges it poses to its readers regarding the necessity for critically self-aware engagement with aesthetic experience and education.

Harvard University Press has posted the following synopsis of *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* on its web site:

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's unwillingness to sacrifice the ethical in the name of the aesthetic, or to sacrifice the aesthetic in grappling with the political, makes her task formidable. As she wrestles with these fraught relationships, she rewrites Friedrich Schiller's concept of play as double bind, reading Gregory Bateson with Gramsci as she negotiates Immanuel Kant, while in dialogue with her teacher Paul de Man. Among the concerns Spivak addresses is this: Are we ready to forfeit the wealth of the world's languages in the name of global communication? "Even a good globalization (the failed dream of socialism) requires the uniformity which the diversity of mother-tongues must challenge," Spivak writes. "The Tower of Babel is our refuge....In essays on theory, translation, Marxism, gender, and world literature, and on writers such as Assia Djebar, J. M. Coetzee, and Rabindranath Tagore, Spivak argues for the social urgency of the humanities and renews the case for literary studies, imprisoned in the corporate university. "Perhaps," she writes, "the literary can still do something."¹

This synopsis is inserted here because the smart people who work for Harvard UP have spent untold hours figuring out the book's basic meaning and purpose, saving me time from having to duplicate their effort at condensation. To be sure, the knotty passage echoes the intricacy of Spivak's own thinking, offering no solace to weary readers who ask, with Andrew Marvell, "Might a soul bathe there, and be clean, or slake its thirst?" If the oasis to which Spivak brings us is the Tower of Babel, the answer is "No!" It is arguable that integrating the Tower of Babel as a structural norm of radical theory unwisely complicates our access to the issue at stake, aesthetic experience. The Tower of Babel most aptly characterizes not art as original experience in the romantic sense, that is, as *Spieltrieb*, imaginative play, but Spivak's deconstructive mode of reflecting on aesthetic experience, which is her style of "contorted enablement" (533). At almost each step of the way with Spivak, we have to disentangle her intense intellectualization of art from the furtive and untamed essence of art as original experience, the latter accessible to both elite thinkers and so-called common and curious world citizens.

Spivak's title is somewhat misleading. The prospective reader of *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* should know before purchasing it that it is not a unified treatise on aesthetic education; almost all of Spivak's twenty-five chapters are previously published papers and lectures on a variety of topics, with aesthetic education being *one thread among others*. A sampling of her numerous chapters is as follows: Ch. 2: "Who Claims Alterity?"; Ch. 5: "Culture: Situating Feminism"; Ch. 8: "Supplementing Marxism"; Ch. 13: "Nationalism and the Imagination"; Ch. 16: "Imperative to Re-imagine the Planet"; Ch. 22: "The Stakes of a World Literature." One can find nuggets of practical wisdom if one searches in a painstaking manner, but banalities of theory as well. When Spivak quotes Jonathan Culler's description of literature as a fundamental source for experiencing otherness, other cultures and people, she at once appreciates the gesture and warns us against allowing this to become an abstraction. In each case one must ask who is speaking of otherness, who is valuing it and from what institutional position, and what agency (discursive consciousness or discourse community) is at stake or hopes to be altered by alterity. Agency has to be rethought and not taken for granted. (141) When I read such assertions, they strike me as rephrased truisms of literary theory and not as anything particularly original or insightful.

Only in the last two chapters (24 and 25), "Sign and Trace" and "Tracing the Skin of Day" does Spivak, willing to shirk or loosen her intellectual and cultural cargo, her institutional allegiances, visit art galleries and begin to feel free. These chapters are arguably her most intriguing *aesthetic essays* because her refined skills in exegesis offer no guarantees when it comes to reading works of art. In "Sign and Trace" Spivak becomes an imaginative viewer in a museum, linking the PVC and steel artworks of Anish Kapoor (a blimp-like object that occupies an otherwise empty room; giant objects resembling musical trumpets stretched surrealistically across an entire room) to her reflections on globalization as "an island of language in an ocean of traces." In the last chapter, she encounters the artistic installations of Chittrovanu Mazumdar's *Nightskin* which "deny the conceptual" and challenge the viewer with images for which "the human body is not the measure" (501). One finds it refreshing when Spivak's authority is temporarily suspended at art exhibits. Everywhere else that she thinks, writes, and speaks—except rural India—she does so within ivy-sheathed guardrails. "In February 1991 I was in a pretty villa on Lake Como, owned by the Rockefeller Foundation" (165). This life of ease eventually alienates her by shielding her from the *world of risk and experimentation* in which art thrives. Much later in her career, as she leaves campus on the way to an art gallery, Spivak says, "Hopeless, I step out of the corporatized university..." This melancholy tone becomes fairly consistent as her career reaches new heights. I am sure the irony is not lost on her that one of Anish Kapoor's artworks is titled *Melancholia*.

What explains Spivak's melancholy tone, if not the *tedium vitae* of academic life? Her twenty-five chapters have inexorably absorbed the noble but cumbersome institutional privileges they seek to challenge. She cannot escape the apparatus and the archive. One gets the *impression* (my recourse to this aesthetic term is deliberate) that the author has absorbed all the political positions and critical viewpoints from which or by which one *cannot* be accused of being neocolonialist, imperialist, chauvinist, racist, hegemonist, capitalist, and so on. After critically absorbing and adopting deconstructive, non-hegemonic, neo-Marxist, and feminist discourses, and after having taught for several decades at Columbia, Spivak remains somewhat despondent, confessing for example that her fatalistically titled study, *Death of a Discipline* (2003) was "too hopeful a book." Her sense of foreboding about literary studies (and the role of the humanities in culture and education) exudes a crepuscular atmosphere that is dispelled by her critical

intelligence and her subdued utopianism--all stubborn Enlightenment atavisms recuperated by postcolonial theorists. Spivak's phrasing of global doom is cleverly alliterative:

Muscular Marxists are giving way to the corporate-funded feudality of the digitally confident alterglobalists. Deep language learning and unconditional ethics are so out of joint with this immensely powerful brave new world-machine that people of our sort make this plea because we cannot do otherwise, because our shared obsession declares that some hope of bringing about the epistemological revolution needed to turn capitalism around to gendered social justice must still be kept alive against all hope (26).

Spivak understands that the liberal intellectuals and artists ("people of our sort") are grossly outnumbered in their confrontation with a global corporate juggernaut that has assimilated everyone in its wake into a sort of feudal cosmopolis or megalopolis. The global system of electronic attention capture that the suicidal Guy Debord called "the spectacle" in 1968 has vastly outgrown his darkest projections, with the promise of universal electronic access and the convenience of "browse and purchase" making no dent in disparities of wealth, but instead widening surveillance and public exposure online, invigorating day traders in stocks and derivatives, bundling electronic finance and education networks together in learning and payment streams, and undercutting the pricing structures of local merchants from booksellers to hardware stores.

In this paranoid context Gayatri Spivak warns us of an "immensely powerful brave new world-machine." Let us echo her battle cry: people of her sort, thinking people, must try to turn this juggernaut around; she hopes against hope that thinking people can bring about an "epistemological revolution needed to turn capitalism around to gendered social justice." Spivak argues: "You cannot be against globalization; you can only work collectively and persistently to turn it into strategy-driven rather than crisis-driven globalization" (105). Globalization is inescapable, Spivak argues, and poses both a permanent challenge and opportunity. All the more reason for an education grounded in critical theory, gender studies, history, democratic principles, identity politics, Marxian economics, and of course aesthetics. This is heavy cargo for an English major to bear, and although one feels that Spivak is overbearing in her expectations, she does insist that we *imagine distinct imperatives* (and courses of study) out of our *concrete situations*. One might call this the existential component of her reflections on globalism, underscoring the *local conditions* of engaged global thinking.

Be this as it may, one needs to ask if Spivak's dispirited but well-read English and Comparative Literature majors are prepared to take on the global system compared to computer hackers. Here the difference between disciplinary skills in the information sciences and humanities proves noteworthy. It would be ideal if the differences complimented each other in action. The humanities majors under Spivak's wing are trained in *critique* and encouraged to study *foreign languages*; these are their primary tools for taking on hegemonic globalism in a personal intervention, mainly through teaching overseas—such is their mode of "hacking" cultures (local false consciousness, prejudice, etc.) and negotiating democratic change. Hackers of course manipulate *code* as their mode of critical intervention. The electronic utopia is a hacker's paradise whose aesthetic intricacy is visible only to those who penetrate firewalls to behold the beauty of vulnerable programming codes. Hackers know that the system is everything, yet is only as strong as its code. They are the new radicals who once populated the humanities

and social science majors. Their mission is to beat the system, hence revolutionary; but it is also pleasurable: “Hacking is something you do with a gleeful laugh.”²

It is darkly ironic that even as English teachers tremble and students lose faith and flee the humanities, hackers perceive literature and the fine arts as progressive forces for change which deploy figurative language as weaponry. “Another way to counterattack is with metaphor,” says the programmer and artist, Paul Graham. He continues as follows:

Arthur Miller undermined the House Un-American Activities Committee by writing a play, *The Crucible*, about the Salem witch trials. He never referred directly to the committee and so gave them no way to reply. What could HUAC do, defend the Salem witch trials? And yet Miller’s metaphor stuck so well that to this day the activities of the committee are often described as a “witch hunt.”³

The straightforward optimism of this paragraph contrasts with the hedged affirmations of Spivak, as when she says, “Perhaps the literary can still do something.” That “perhaps” separates academic activists such as Spivak from the can-do ethos of hackers, artists, and scientific innovators who take risks with the understanding that failure is the way to success. It seems timely (yet awfully late) to argue for stronger *interdisciplinary sharing of critical methods* between the humanities and information sciences, something I have rarely seen on campuses since my graduate studies at Rensselaer Polytechnic in Technical Communications.

There are several modes of progressive action that become visible in Spivak’s epistemological revolution: critical theory, pedagogy, and art. All of her writing deploys critical theory, but its effectiveness as a concrete intervention or catalyst is dubious as advanced literacy declines, and if it remains unallied with the information sciences. It is no longer charismatic to lead literature students toward a Tower of Babel, as they will retreat to plush facilities in the School of Business. Pedagogy, however, is certainly promising as a soft revolution. The accounts of Spivak’s own experience teaching disadvantaged students in India make her book worth purchasing. Spivak sees teaching as an opportunity to inculcate students with race and gender sensitivity, to raise awareness about identity politics, about problems of globalization, and to encourage multiculturalism and multilingualism. As I said earlier, she is a persistent and passionate advocate of foreign language study, a position with which I agree at a time when a revision of the General Education curriculum at my own university seeks to diminish or extirpate foreign language study as a requirement. Art is another force for change, which is why Spivak’s book resurrects the ghost of Schiller. Utterly disillusioned with the irrational violence of the French Revolution, Schiller advocated art as the missing link in education that would cultivate citizens in a spiritual way that science and logic failed to accomplish. But today art is no less peripheral in the curriculum than in 1795; like foreign language study, art often finds itself in a precarious situation in schools seeking to economize.

“Hopeless, I step out of the corporatized university...” Surely Spivak is not alone in her despair. But she has her own ambitions and desires. Something large, something panoramic is being pursued in these pages by Spivak, and although its contours appear in the granular details of argument and observation, the whole enterprise remains elusive or phantasmal and feels like academic overreaching. What eludes her is art as original experience and will-to-chance, as whim, as revolutionary desire. As her career reaches its zenith, art has become Spivak’s furtive whale, *Moby-Dick*: the elusive horizon of transcendence. The problem is less with Spivak than the limits of professorial discourse, the institutional and cultural preconditions that set both the limits and possibilities of her identity and deeds, her achievements as an educator and public

intellectual. She has not failed at anything for thirty years except to escape these conditions (and hence herself); she has not compromised her authorities, which remains very much intact, almost noble, so that when she passes nearby, assistant professors feel she comes from a great height and hope to get a glimpse of her. The irony of Spivak's situation is that her formal constraints (real or imagined) as a radical theorist bring professional success. She is identified with the era of the popularization of literary theory. As such, she does not follow Schiller's advice in *The Aesthetic Education of Man*: "Live with your century but do not be its creature." Literary theory rode a wave of success for the two defining decades of her rise in academia. This state of affairs in literary theory is arguably what the inscrutable Georges Bataille calls "the impasse of a rebellion that reverts to submission when successful."⁴

At this point, Spivak would have to ruin her authority and will *caprice*--a force banned from the university ruled by cost effective analysis--to gain her spiritual freedom and express her ideas artistically. She has become a consummate professor, not artist. Her performance has been critical--based in *critique*—and not creative, i.e., not based in *transfiguration*. Her writings, nuanced and perspicuous, are critical performances. She is the most interesting professor in the world (as the Dos Equis beer commercial says about the "most interesting man in the world").

Notes

¹The Harvard UP website URL for Spivak is as follows:
www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674051836.

²Paul Graham, *Hackers and Painters* (Bejing and Cambridge: O'Reilly Media, 2004), 54.

³Paul Graham, *Hackers and Painters*, 47.

⁴Georges Bataille, *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge*, trans. Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 195.