

The Politics of the Production of Knowledge

An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

STUART J. MURRAY: Let us begin with the general question of communicability and critical writing.¹

GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK: In a recent interview I was trying to talk to the general American book buyer.² This is what I said about communicability and critical writing, answering a question about my book, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*: I think I have learned something from this big book, and that it is perhaps not fair to the reader to go from one end of the spectrum to another.

There will be a question later about my work in Asia, so that is one end of the spectrum, and Columbia University in New York is the other end of the spectrum. But I also go very much from high theory to activist discourse in my book.

If the general reader wants to approach the book, Chapter Three, which is on history, might be the place to begin. The point is not to be turned off too quickly. If it seems wordy at times, move right along. We skim when we read long books, don't we? Even in Chapter One, which is a little daunting for people because it is about philosophy, if one moves on deciding not to be turned off by the fact that I include German words because the translations are not always satisfactory, there is an argument which is not just for philosophers, but for the general reader who hasn't decided that where his or her understanding stops, elitism begins.

I would really like to challenge and invite the general reader to move through this as if it were not a difficult book, even though I say that I do go here perhaps too violently from one end to the other. But I think the experiment is worth making. I don't think a little self-doubt is bad. That's how

I myself read when I read a complicated text or even popularized science, or when I read philosophy, even when I read Aristotle with my negligible Classical Greek. It's not easy and I feel daunted. I do feel self-doubt. It's like going to the gym for me. Have you seen the people who are really trying at those machines—groaning, but pushing? No pain, no gain? We know that in terms of the body. Why have we forgotten that in terms of the mind? A little bit of pain is not bad. Of course, one will never really understand everything of anything. It's a challenge and an invitation to the general reader not to be turned off. The argument is not hard. It requires a little imaginative charity, but I believe there *is* something when you've finished all those pages.

There is some degree of shared assumptions in a so-called public language, but nonetheless, we all know that the *exact* thing is not getting communicated to each and every one. The general law of communication is that it's never a straight line—it's always a curved one. Given this, what am I going to do? Am I going to engage an ever more general reader, lower my sights, so that I can speak to this person? No, I'm going to be as precise as I can be; I'm going to assume a reader who is going to take the trouble to find out what it is I'm speaking about.

The critical must reemphasize the counterintuitive. In the essay that I've written for *What's Left of Theory?* I try to show how Marx is actually pushing the counterintuitive—because that's what you teach, after all, that which is not exactly already understood by everyone.³ When we're trying to make it accessible, we are constantly running interference.

We are not *obliged* to question common sense, we are not *obliged* to question grammar, we are not *obliged* to question language, but if we are obliged to do so in order to make a point, we ought to have the freedom to do so and to count on a reader who is interested enough to see why. There is a perfect example in someone having ridiculed me for putting a hyphen inside the word *geo-graphy*. Of course, that person was absolutely unsympathetic to the fact that by doing such a thing—such an “uncommonsensical” thing, even though it is a common word—I was asking the reader (who happened to be a man) to understand that I was talking about the fact that when we look at a map, we are looking at stuff that has been—literally!—written, written on, an imagined surface of the earth. My argument was about the disappearance of the aboriginal. It was a pretty serious gesture, putting that hyphen there, but this guy was so fixated on the fact that I had done such an outlandish thing that he couldn't see that there was a reason why.

So, to repeat, it is not *necessary* that we question grammar, or question common sense, or question language, but if we do so, I think that the question of writing, the question of the politics of writing, the politics of the production of knowledge, must be kept separate from the question of diffi-

culty. It's not the same question. I quite often find that people criticize me for writing in this confused way and then take *that* as a dismissal of everything I want to say. That's my objection. My objection is not that one has to be difficult. My objection is that *if* one has to be difficult or if one *is* difficult—and has a style that is perhaps not always easy to handle for the reader—that should be kept separate from the question of the validity of the production of knowledge. It's not identical.

There is a further point I wish to make—and again I'm speaking personally here—I have tried over the years to make my language clearer. I believe my language *is* clearer now, but I assure you, it is not easier to understand. In fact, it may be more difficult to understand, because the simple words seem to be easy, and they're not. The question of difficulty is much more complicated and much more layered and nuanced than one would imagine. I don't think that it's necessary to meddle with “ordinary language,” but *if* it is necessary to do so, one must have the confidence in the readership to see what the point of it is and that the question of the politics of the production of knowledge should be kept separate from—only related to—the question of the difficulty of language.

SJM: So, by having such a confidence in your readership, and by refusing to level-down your language—“lower your sights”—are you ensuring the curvature of language, throwing your reader a “curve ball” now and then?

GCS: No, I'm just saying that the law of curvature is the general law of communication. Whatever you say, to whomever, alone, or in crowds, it's common sense that the words are not going to convey some unified meaning from me to you the way in which we copy a file from one diskette to another. There is no question that one is subject to that law; and in fact we try and try to turn that law into a straight line; that is the effort. But one has to remember that at the end of the day one is subject to that law of curvature, which is an iron-clad law; we cannot break it up.

But that was not my main point. My main point was about the fact that one must be allowed to be counterintuitive, that in critical writing or when we're teaching anything, it *is* counterintuitive; otherwise we're just repeating what the other person already knows. And I'm suggesting that the question of the politics of the production of knowledge must be kept separate from—although it's related to, it's not identical with—the clarity of the speech or prose. Finally, I'm saying that a seemingly clear prose is not, by that token, easier to understand.

There's another problem that people have, and, generally, South Asians have come forth with this one; and that's that I don't seem to be writing about Kant writing about colonialism and that I seem to focus instead on the place where Kant is *not* writing about that. Well, if they took a moment

to read—and the reader's role with difficult writing is *transactional*—they would see that that is exactly the point I am making. If one were to look at expressed sentiments, and there are many noble sentiments about *cosmopolitheia* and perpetual peace and so on in Kant, there has been a lot of criticism but also a lot of much deserved applause for such arguments; but in fact for me what is more interesting is the rhetoric of the moment where, in his central philosophical writings, he comes to a central philosophical moment, and therefore I focus there. This is the signature of a literary critic, not an intellectual historian. In fact, a literary critic, by training, focuses on those kinds of moments where a truth is betrayed.

And so by the same token I'm taken to task for not being an Indianist. But I'm not interested in being an Indianist. I'm not even interested in being a kind of refurbished Orientalist who believes that the essence of knowledge is knowledge about knowledge. That's not my problem. In fact, I am a Europeanist who believes that the study of European materials is done best when the wider picture is taken into account. So, indeed, if one goes into the genealogy of this particular objection, one will see that it began the moment I was invited to theorize the work of the subaltern studies group.

At that time I described the preoccupation with subaltern consciousness as a strategic use of essentialism. I think, in hindsight, that it was not such a strategic use of essentialism but simply an assumption that there was such a consciousness. It was at that moment that this particular piece of criticism, that I am not an Indianist, had its origin. To go back to that initial occasion, one of the things that the leader of the collective asked me, in a rather intransigent way, was, could I make a revolution with what I was saying—as Mahasweta Devi could make a revolution with what she was writing. That was in 1986, I believe. I was at that time new to the Indian intellectual scene because I had gone away and had not come back to teach in India until 1987. Today I think I have been enough involved in the subcontinental scene to say that in the current context—in today's globalized world, without the East-West divide—it is much more likely that the kind of educational involvement with a part of the largest sector of the electorate that I have will bring about a revolution of another model than any kind of nationalist strategy.

In fact I had a conversation with Mahasweta Devi, maybe just a month ago. Having secured a good deal of money from the United Nations development fund (which of course, since 1989, is completely uncritical of the transnationalist scene), she said to me: "I want to give to these tribals what will last, like schools and roads." And I looked at her, and I said, look, I want to give them something that will last also, which is to say, in the very long run, changed minds, so that they will not need to be patronized by aid. And I must say that she is such a sympathetic and intelligent woman, that when I

was working in the villages, there came a letter from her acknowledging that, indeed, people do not understand what it is that I am doing with my time and skill. So, to that particular criticism, originally from that disingenuous question—can you make a revolution with your work?—I would now answer differently. At that time I had given an honest answer—I am a literary critic; that is my trade—and that has been misunderstood in order to produce a lot of contempt for what I do; but I believe, sixteen years later, I can say that I now answer that question differently.

That comes at a bit of an angle to the question of difficulty, but it certainly is relevant to the question of a wider audience. I am interested not in oral history, but I am interested in providing the kind of education one gives here to extremely opulent students—in terms of quality—I'm interested in providing *that* sort of education for the vastly disenfranchised. I've been teaching for thirty-eight years. My effort in a corner of rural India is now thirteen years old. I hope I remain alive to have one of the students from these aboriginal schools, after a university education, tell me: Gayatri, your writing is too difficult. I am waiting for that day; I am waiting to have such criticism honestly directed at me from one of them. That criticism—I'll wear it like a crown! I cannot take it seriously when people talk to me about "wider audiences," when this comes from the lazy or reactionary parts of the academy or from the person who would like to use words like *activist*, etc., when all they mean is me, my group.

One's wider audience is a choice. If I wrote a book in Bengali about Marx, that would be a wider audience choice. The wider audience choice is not just simply to banalize or make less precise one's argument for lazier or more reactionary academics. As I've said before, difficulty starts where one's own understanding stops, where there's no attempt at wanting to exercise one's own critical capacity.

SJM: I wonder about writing politics back into difficulty in some sense, because if the "choice" to be lazy or reactionary is not a political choice per se, does it not have political implications?

GCS: Yes, but difficulty as such is not a goal, and by that very token the avoidance of difficulty at all costs is nonsense—avoiding difficulty *at all costs*, that is, to have it as a goal above all else, for an academic audience. That's what I'm talking about; I'm being extremely simpleminded here. Now, there is a question about the commitment to democracy. Don't forget that there is, in democratic action, a coercive edge, whereas education is a noncoercive theory in terms of desire. Obedience in the classroom is scary. In democratic forms of government the fact that democracy has, to quote Lefort, an "empty space" at the end is what distinguishes it from other systems. You never know what the decision will be in democracy.

That undecidability is what we want to close up *at all costs*; that's what all the campaign rhetoric, all the polls, all the conventions, all the talks, all the kissing your wife elaborately in public are trying to do—that is part of democracy; that's not a failure of democracy. Like most rational abstractions, democracy operates by denying its nature, so the undecidable edge of democracy is always won back to decision, always won back to voting results, etc., so that once again it can be opened up to an undecidability, after a period. In the functioning of democracy there is for sure a good deal of coercion—it's not physical or violent; then it wouldn't be called democracy. But as one well knows, coercion is not confined to manipulating ballot boxes and exercising recognizable and visible violence at polling stations. So that's what this whole business of having campaigns is related to.

Now, in both teaching and this kind of democratic procedure, the point is not to have the word *democracy* mean generally that everyone must understand what you're saying. If that were so, then there would not be contending parties. Reasoning people would all reason at once, so everybody would believe the same thing, wouldn't they, if we were to take that to its logical consequence? That's not the point in democracy. Democratic minorities are not just something we should forget; they're not just racial minorities or cultural minorities—the democratic minority is a body count. So, therefore, when one looks at democracy in a thick way, rather than as just a nice buzzword, then it's simpl-minded to think that democracy does not have a coercive moment worked into the structure of its functioning. Whereas, at best education is an uncoercive theory in terms of desire, in the humanities, the social sciences.

And then there is the book. One has to accept the fact that the book is an archaic form now, and we want to keep it residual, rich in wonderful vocabulary. Given the way modes of communication are operating now, the book has to have a different contract with its reader, one that acknowledges that reading, as I said, is transactional. A book is not the functioning of democracy, nor is it the textuality of classroom teaching; the book is a different kind of negotiable instrument. If one wants something that comes more easily, then it is not to the book that one will turn, and so we must give the book its due.

A book is an impacted thing. Either you have that contract with the reader, or the reader has that contract with you—or it won't work. And the humanities are trivialized; the idea of taking time to learn—which is different even from knowing—is being trivialized into just information-command, until even that is no longer pertinent. So, therefore, let us at least, if we are going to engage in that archaic activity, let us insist it be what it can be—that instrument that goes at a slower speed in a world where speed seems to be of the essence. That's what a book is. It is archaic, must remain residual,

can become alternative and oppositional because it is a defective form—a virtual enclave in which people can think. There is no such thing as speed reading—that is why people don't like it.

There is the question of people “not schooled in the same idiom.” Now here again I will talk about the other end of the spectrum, those aboriginal schools. I do that stuff—the teacher training—for my own education, because there what I have to do is to learn to learn from below, and it's difficult. For thirteen years I've been doing this, and I'm just beginning to break the ice, so that the very poor, the very badly educated—and some of these teachers are extremely badly educated—are beginning to have some faith in my way of devising an education, which does not resemble anything like the education available on a rural level. It's scandalous how different the education is below the middle class. Nothing I say, nothing, can stand up against the common sense of that dreadful system of rote learning and getting through exams by memorizing answers to antiquated questions and so on, unless I learn how to teach the counterintuitive.

How long do I stay there? Not long at all, because if I supervise, once I am gone, it will break. These people have been kept millennially uneducated—this is not like going down to Brooklyn! I've been trying very hard not to have them “obey” me. It has taken a very long time to have bits of trust come from the other side. That's been my education, and it's hard to do—hard to read the other's text to the extent that I will be able to think of a way of changing minds uncoercively that would seem plausible to them.

Just today I was looking at “*The Wall Street Journal*” Report⁴ on television, which was about “the hottest new demographic in town”: ten percent of eight-to-ten year olds own bonds. To quote the television program: an eleven-year-old sister and nine-year-old brother have learnt at school and have inspired their father to become an investor. And they're using the thing that Marx knew more than one hundred years ago: the bourgeois ruse—your money keeps growing on your money. Merrill Lynch, Salomon Smith Barney—they're sending people into preschools. . . . Morgan Stanley, American Express, kids' parents and money programs—instead of buying the car, buy the car company! They're called “Generation Y.” There are seventy mutual funds especially designed for kids, and they have managed to spend \$105 billion on their own. I'm just quoting the television program! This is given very positively, right?! We have here how we enter into pliable minds, how children become a part of globalizing financial networks, how exploiters are being trained.

The same day I also saw on NBC: “The MTV generation is driving the economy”; teenagers are the “heads of households” because most parents are working. So we're going from preschoolers, through eight to ten, eleven, and twelve—teaching them investment—into the MTV generation. This is the

real core of children's education. And then, the same morning, a bit later on ABC—you see, all the networks, first CBS, then NBC, now ABC: Elizabeth Cady Stanton's granddaughter comes on; she says her grandmother said that women's votes are instruments for social change (we see the regulation documentary footage), and then she praises the female executive of Merrill Lynch—we've just seen Merrill Lynch sending people into schools, right?—saying Merrill Lynch is “working for her.”

So, you see, this is a textile, this is a cultural fabric, this is children's education. As far as I'm concerned, for your own education you want to do the thing counter to this kind of effort. Remember, this is just one morning, I was doing my own work, but as I was moving around, I turned on the TV a bit, and I got these three wonderful nuggets—it's not research.

This is the idiom being placed within children's minds; this is the cultural fabric being woven; this is what says, “We won't read anything difficult.” When we are training children in this way, these things are against turning globalization around constantly for better social redistribution. I believe that you cannot turn capitalism around to anything that is not within capitalism, in other words, corporate philanthropy, development-sustaining cost efficiency, impatient human-rights intervention with no time to respect local assumptions. We need strong virtues that one must not call “precapitalist” because then you're some kind of a social Darwinist, and we all know that that's a crock! We need other virtues defective for capitalism. But that doesn't mean that that's what should cover the world because globalization cannot, and in fact, should not, be stopped. In order for globalization to globalize all over the world, to be strategy driven, rather than each time crisis driven (the crisis of the North upon the South), we need those other kinds of virtues.

Now, if you like, my effort is at this other end of the spectrum—with the aboriginal children, because they're part of the larger system in countries of the South, the rural poor. When you work here, at this end you can only hope that one person's mind will change, one person who will perhaps become interested in this unglamorous work that is interesting in other ways.

SJM: One at a time. Sort of a “strategic particularism,” if you will?

GCS: Of course! Of course! Now, I should also say that problem-solving activists reject what I'm talking about as well because they're impatient with problems to be solved; they don't have the time to construct extremely fragile collectivities that aren't just already there. By their supervision and their constant insistence to present a real collectivity they must remain focused on the moment of *freedom from* oppression. They assume that once the problem is solved and the time for the *freedom to* be responsible comes, that the oppressed somehow will do good. That just isn't true; the facts don't bear that

out. My kind of work suffers from the rejection not only from these wonderfully investment-trained preschoolers but rejection also from the problem-solving activists who are just interested in going from problem to problem and solving them. They're absolutely crisis driven.

I think the hope is really for an open future so that one teaches in such a way that there will be some kind of other-directed thinking when things will have changed. But somehow, without any infrastructural support, and therefore not particularly effective within a global context, that sort of hope is all that one can have.

Now, as for the relationship between the academy and journalism. The vast field of journalism should certainly not be ignored—entertainment, infomercials, MTV, and what is the Internet? Is it virtual journalism masquerading as something like books? Is it some kind of simulacrum of that archaic mode? What is the nexus of telecommunication and finance capital, where any kind of information picture moving is okay? Where does journalism end these days? Where does it begin? Should we accept little magazines as also a defunct residual form? I am not talking about fanzines and stuff, because there is within journalism now this move forward the other medium that, even if it is between covers, does not resemble a book because it does not have that transactionality. It's not a question of high and low. It's a question of different kinds of production in language.

SJM: Could we call this “criticality”?

GCS: I don't know if you could call it criticality; but if you like, you could. I think that the concept of criticality itself is more toward one end. They're all using some form of verballity, but I don't know what journalism is anymore. The newspaper, little magazines, journals—these are beginning to shade off into the instant. And not only an instant, but an alternative instant. And sometimes a kind of noninstantiable virtuality. So, if you bring me to the question of journalism and critical writing, I will repeat: we are in a residual mode, which I don't think of on an evolutionary scheme because I'm not a social Darwinist. But nonetheless I welcome Raymond Williams's model that we keep the residual, not just as alternative, but oppositional, by insisting on the fact that the book is transactional; in order to survive as it is, it has to negotiate a different kind of contract with the reader. Finally, that hope is not a very strong one because of the trivialization of the humanities and the quality of the social sciences—and at the same time the weaving of the textile of the cultural fabric gets lower and lower as training turns into this kind of virtualized investment.

SJM: Let's return to the question of your writing with a more specific question. You mention in several places that you write with great difficulty,

both in English and in your mother tongue, Bengali. You say: "I would like to be able to write more sober prose."⁵ Can "sober" prose readily be distinguished from its "inebriated" counterpart? What would it mean to understand your prose as "inebriated"?

GCS: Sober prose—a lovely question. When I did that interview, I was really talking about the rhetoric of expressed desire and not of a goal. Expressed desire, half thinking, half projecting—that's the medium. It's not really an expressed thing. I believe I was using *sober* somewhat more figuratively than you imagine—like *clearly*—and I think what I was contrasting it to was the fact that my passions show.

We need not just a weapon, but a recognizable weapon, an up-to-the-mark, effective weapon. If the "subaltern"—which is a word for those who do not have infrastructural support—resist on their own, it will be useless: it will not be recognized by other women, even by other women in their own families. Therefore, I have said—in a very enraged and passionate way: "The subaltern cannot speak." This was picked up by a kind of narcissism in the academy, where anybody who feels she has not had a good deal immediately decides that she herself is a subaltern. And so we hear Spivak takes away the voice of resistance. "The subaltern cannot speak" was something like saying there is no justice in the world—you know, that sort of passionate rhetoric. But I decided that rather than confront the kind of nonsense I was hearing, it was better to take the rage out and rewrite it in simpler language. That is, if you like, "sober" language, serious language.

And I think, you know, I cannot say that I regret that passion makes me confusing sometimes. So that desire is just an expression of desire that is perhaps not being fulfilled. It's like I wish I could be something that, clearly, I don't quite want to be—that was the mode of my statement, because when you cannot do something, you say, "Oh, I wish I could." And it's often the frivolous and not just the passionate; but if you really want to get the weight of that frivolous, maybe we should talk about the archaeology of the frivolous—but that would take us too far afield. . . .

SJM: I understand you are passionately involved in grassroots literacy projects in Asia. Would you talk a bit more about your activism in this sphere and how it informs the language of your theoretical commitments? What act of "translation" takes place for you, Gayatri Spivak, as you shuttle between Asia and America, trying to effect a communication?

GCS: I'm really not involved in "grassroots literacy projects." It would be difficult for me to really run literacy projects. My real schools, these decade-long schools, are in Western West Bengal. They are not "literacy projects"—they are schools that I run. I feed the children, I pay the teachers, I have small

schoolrooms built, I hang out—going again and again, never staying too long—to find ways of being responsible, so that I can tell them how to do things, and teaching teachers to teach by learning from the children. You know, it's that kind of labor-intensive work; there is no project there—it's all my moving around with my teachers in these one-room schools.

What act of translation takes place? I almost don't know what act of translation takes place, but I do know that something happens. I don't try to effect a communication between the two. Over the last few years there are many ways in which my experience there is teaching me how to teach here. After all, it is useful to be far from the triumphant culture with its sense of manifest destiny. As I revise I am on a bus returning from a UNIFEM luncheon, wonderful women, but talk about a sense of "manifest destiny"! The idea of being in an indispensable country, you know, cultural rights everywhere—as if all of this took place so that one could be sitting in a classroom.

So, I try more and more to teach. I teach in my classroom that at the speed of slow reading of difficult books there are no stock options. The idea is to see that reading literature in its literariness is to practice accessing the other as other so that the reader is adrift—determined by the text—in unpredictable alterity. This is what I see *here*, and basically it is something that I have learned from my experience *there*. In the beginning I thought of teaching here as just instrumental, as earning my living so that I could work there. But truly my work there has begun to show that a similar kind of work can be done here as well. Is that a translation? I don't know. But I feel the two ends of the question coming together more and more.

There is another thing. I teach Longinus to my undergraduate students in the history of critical thought. At a certain point Longinus says one of the ways one can produce sublime writing is by thinking one is addressing "the illustrious dead." Now, I don't think they necessarily have to be the illustrious dead. The men and women of these areas with whom I've been involved for the last thirteen years, when I try to learn to learn from below, *they* are my silent judges, they, like Longinus's illustrious dead, these persons so far removed from the dominant idiom; they're always there. They have no power over me, but they have all the power over me. It is in their ghostly presence that I read, write, and teach. Nothing that I read, write, or teach wouldn't be endorsed by the fact that they are. And that does indeed give a certain kind of responsibility, which should not be confused with the obligation to be clear for the lazy or reactionary.

SJM: If I may quote you here: "You have to hypercathect what you translate. That is the politics of translation."⁶ Would you mind elaborating on the crossing of the libidinal, the political, and the ethical within translation? How ought we to make sense of "culture as translation"?

GCS: I think translation is something one cannot avoid. When I said hypercathexis, I was really thinking of “attending.” What is interesting about hypercathexis is what one would call not attention but attending. Cathecting has a more libidinal application, and I meant something less given over to the libido. How do you understand hypercathexis?

SJM: I was thinking of hypercathexis along the lines of what Freud discussed in his paper on psychoanalysis and the so-called war neuroses. There he found that a neurosis might be prevented by a hypercathexis of the injured body part—effectively binding the libidinal energy. If I recall, the hypercathexis was seen by Freud almost as a prophylactic against psychic trauma.

GCS: Yes, so the hypercathexis is the enigma of survival, as it were. That’s very interesting and would relate to the idea of translation. What one “translates” is the untranslatability of language, the untranslatability of idiom. One is translating for content, so it’s the language that’s falling out; there is no language there. I’m thinking of the lost limb: it is language that is the lost limb there.

SJM: Well, what survives then?

GCS: What survives? Nothing survives. Just as the arm is not there, the language is not there. And yet, it is the enigma of survival: we survive without the arm.

SJM: You have said that the infant “invents his or her mother tongue. That is how the infant begins, by creating a language which then the parent learns, as it were. Through that it develops into a language with a history.”⁷ Would you elaborate on this notion of “invention,” and might there be implications here for the project of cultural translation?

GCS: Cultural translation, the idea that the infant invents his or her mother tongue—these notions come to me from Melanie Klein. But I always insist when I talk about Melanie Klein that this is not the Melanie Klein that you will find in Kleinian psychoanalysis or even in most readings of her. Thankfully, I have read Melanie Klein with the kind of passion I was describing to you, so what I offer is a kind of digest of Spivak using Klein with this sort of focus. Did you read “Translation as Culture”?⁸ I’ll quote from there:

“Melanie Klein . . . suggested that the work of translation is an incessant shuttle, that is, a ‘life.’ The human infant grabs on to some one thing, and then things. This grabbing (*begreifen*) of an outside, indistinguishable from an inside, constitutes an inside, going back and forth and coding everything into a sign-system by the thing(s) grasped. One can call this crude coding a

‘translation.’” The point is that we, “the reader . . . translating the incessant translating shuttle into that which is read, must have the most intimate knowledge of the ruse of representation and ‘permissible narratives’—Klein’s words—which make up the substance of a culture, and must also become responsible and accountable with the writing-translating presupposed original.”

Now this idea of the subject and the shuttling described by Klein is something that *will have* happened, not something that definitely happens. In this understanding of translation in Melanie Klein, therefore, the word *translation* itself loses its literal sense. That is Melanie Klein’s narrative. Although she does talk about Oedipus, etc., because she was devoted to Freud, I think this is secondary in Klein; it’s part of the permissible narrative. In fact, if you really look at Klein carefully, you’ll see that the subject’s an economy; it’s a constant shuttling, and Oedipus is only a resource rather than an object-choice narrative that one adopts. Klein doesn’t go from Imaginary to Symbolic, etc. She’s very, very interesting from this point of view. I believe Deleuze and Guattari misunderstood her, and Lacan did not acknowledge her.

SJM: Perhaps I could ask another question in this vein. Psychoanalytic theories posit an unconscious of various sorts that gets taken up critically as a model of radical alterity. Here at the heart of the “I” resides something irreducibly Other, and yet it is also, after a fashion, “mine.” But how much of this, to follow Lacan, is “structured like a language”? You have said, “When you say it’s structured like a language, when it’s structured like metaphor and metonymy, everything begins to go astray.”⁹ What is this going astray? Is it a productive crisis? And, conversely, might there be a better model, outside the vagaries of language, to theorize unconscious alterity?

GCS: Now, my idea of “radical alterity” is not psychoanalytic. I cannot think of this resident other—which, indeed, psychologically I cannot access but nonetheless is metapsychologically imbricated in whatever can be called a “me,” if not an “I”—I can’t think of it as “radically” other. It is only psychologically other; I cannot access it psychologically. My notion of radical alterity is—if it can be a notion—that to be human is to be angled, that is to say, leaning toward another. It’s more philosophical than psychoanalytic. This entails an assumption of a radical alterity, so therefore it is in fact not an antonym of the self; an antonym of the self would not be a radical alterity—it would be alterity but not “radical.” A radical alterity *is* not, as it were. And so for me the psychoanalytic theoretical fiction of the unconscious is not a radical alterity insofar as it is the “it” of the “I.”

I would like to point you to this essay, which you no doubt have read,

which is part of Lacan's twentieth seminar, called *Encore* (Again)—where he's talking to Jakobson, "À Jakobson." He says, "[I]f one considers everything that, given the definition of language, follows regarding the foundation of the subject—so thoroughly renewed and subverted by Freud that it is on that basis that everything he claimed to be unconscious can be grounded—then one must, in order to leave Jakobson his own turf (*domaine réservé*), forge another word. I will call it linguistricks (*linguisterie*)."¹⁰ He is trying to say he was not doing linguistics when he took that line from Jakobson: he was "linguistricking." Now, this is the important part. Lacan continues: "The fact that I say (*Mon dire*) that the unconscious is structured like a language is not part and parcel of the field of linguistics." So, the fact that it was taken to mean, literally, the transposition of the linguistic model of metonymy and metaphor working on the chain of the production of signifiers—desire and the symptom—that is what here, quietly, in the 1970s Lacan is dissolving as he is moving into his postsemiotic phase.

I'm but an aficionado of psychoanalysis. I have the same kind of feeling about psychoanalysis as I have about any sort of ritualized behavior: it works because it works. And so I would say that the effort to tap the production of the subject in order to restore social agency—I think that is incredible, because one must work with this distinction between subject and agent, although at the limit they are shifting. But nonetheless, I would not want to theorize unconscious alterity because my idea of unconscious alterity is precisely that which resists theorizing. So it may be that language is the best model. But that is a problem, rather than a solution. By doing this I'm simply repeating a lesson learned from Derrida early on, which he hasn't turned his back on. In the very first thing of Derrida's—his introduction to Husserl's "Origin of Geometry"—the point was that Husserl solved the problem too quickly and too easily by falling on the model of language. Of course that's the model that will always solve the problem—but what's the use? That solution *is* the very problem.

SJM: Would you comment on South Africa's "Truth and Reconciliation Commission," presided over by Archbishop Desmond Tutu? The idea is, basically, that perpetrators of crimes under Apartheid publicly confess their crimes—a ritual intended to bring peace and a sense of justice to post-Apartheid South Africa, even if this does little to change the material conditions of its citizens. What faith do you have in such ventures; are you hopeful? Can past horrors be represented adequately in/by language, without Nuremberg-style trials, and to what end?

GCS: First of all, I will say that in the idea of stating something ritually we're not thinking about psychotherapy. We're thinking about the fact that ritual works because it works. That's the power of ritual. In fact, what we're

looking at here is a tremendous exercise in the literalization of a kind of de-hegemonized Christianity. De Man used to say that in order to be political, you have to literalize the metaphor. To an extent that's what this is. And therefore what is happening here is not an adequate representation of horrors. In other words, it's not an adequate *Darstellung* of horrors in speech but that other meaning of representation, that is to say, a metonym. Speech becomes an accepted agential, rather than subjective, metonym for the unrepresentable. And therefore it does not remain unrepresentable. The very unrepresentability, the unrepresentability of a horror that approaches the absolute, is represented by its metonymic substitution in speech. That's how ritual works.

When penance is given—from within a generalized discourse—in exchange for confession in the more classic structure of confession, one would have to think that all Catholics are fools or naive to imagine this is taken by a subtle Catholic mind as some kind of actual substitution. It is the act of faith in the substitution that works because it works. Like an exchange, it's not reasonable. That functioning of the value form—that's what it is in the classic structure of confession—that functioning is as symbolic as all exchange.

SJM: You have recently said: "Triumphant global finance capital/world trade can only be resisted with irony."¹¹ Would you talk a little about irony and the possibility of a resistance in language?

GCS: De Man's definition is that irony is permanent parabasis, which is the move in Attic comedy when the Chorus steps forth and there is a kind of collective voice that interrupts the main action of the play. Even there, however, one voice wants to take over in the Chorus, etc. These counterglobalizing movements, if you globalize globalization rather than see it as just metropolitan migration, these movements are constantly disrupting, not at meetings but by small initiatives, one after the other, one after the other . . . turning capital around and trying but not succeeding because of the absence of infrastructural recognition and what I call relative restricted permeabilities—so that stuff from the top (for example, the WTO demonstrations in Seattle [December 1999]) permeates down, but not much percolates up. This is what I call the irony of global finance capital—permanent parabasis: constant interruption of the operating of the main story (finance capital and world trade) by a collective voice. That's what I meant; I did not mean ironic language.

There are people who know about this: there is a Third World network; there is an Asian Women's Human Rights Council; it's not like no one knows. But in the sector that calls itself the international civil society, or the

general northern-based radical sector that goes on demonstrations—the people who go to the Beijing plus Five meetings at the UN headquarters in New York—with them there isn't enough of an infrastructure that percolates up. If you look at the big email circuits produced by the Beijing plus Five meetings, etc., you will see that what is often being reported is people making NGOs and asking for help. But we're not talking about how nicely they work as NGOs, and so on! It is amazing if you actually read the reams of stuff that's produced. But for the actual non-English-speaking, local-language-speaking workers in the field, there is no infrastructure that will allow the news of this resistance to reach up as such. It is taking place—the permanent parabasis is taking place—but it remains inaccessible to northern-based, somewhat impatient organizational do-gooders. The northern-based stuff or the NGO-level southern stuff is not, strictly speaking, interruptions. Those ruptures are critically continuous with the system.

SJM: Back in 1988 you said, "There is a practical political left in the United States, but it has no connection with the academic left."¹² Very recently, however, you have lamented the *absence* of a "practical left in the United States," suggesting the left is now consigned entirely to "a dwindling enclave in the academic and journalistic world."¹³ Have your views changed in the last decade? And is the academic left "impractical"? These academic and often esoteric debates take place, as you say, "with a vigor matched only by [their] lack of consequence outside the academy."¹⁴ How do you reconcile the need to be critical of "ordinary language" politics and the need to be accessible, to "go public as often as we can"?¹⁵

GCS: I won't give you a direct answer because I've talked at length about this in the first part of our conversation. But I would like to end with an anecdote. I cotaught a course in fall 2000 with the head of the Political Science Department—an enlightened, rational choice kind of colleague. I did this because we don't often enough talk to such colleagues to recognize that our account of the most radical in left thinking is incomplete. Here, for example, I hold in my hand a book written by another colleague of mine—Professor Elster—with whom I have had only one casual conversation in all these years! The academic subdivision of labor is so strong, and the dismissal of the kind of work we do—which is the occasion for our conversation—is so Olympian in the other part of the academy, that he would be completely dismissive of my work.

I've just started to read his book *Alchemies of the Mind*, which has for a subtitle: *Rationality and the Emotions*. Rationality and the emotions—very promising, and indeed, I find his earlier work, *Ulysses and the Sirens*, for example, extremely suggestive. But look at this. He is talking about psychic

causality as "a recurring and intelligible causal pattern," a "mechanism." This is so far from our understanding of a lot of the psychic as being metapsychological! The difference between the psychic as apparatus (although he's using the word *mechanism*, his understanding of mechanism is "an intelligible causal pattern") and the fact that there is a metapsychological that is not accessible to psychology, that is not continuous with psychology and a kind of taxonomy of phenomenal emotions and affects, etc.—that difference is so commonsensical to us. Consider the question: "Who dreams?" or that to dream is normal. I'm not even going into any kind of theoretical thicket here. This immediately gives the lie to this notion of psychic causalities. So in the interest of a coherent theoretical system, which presumably enriches the rational choice idea of political theory by an account of the emotions, one must impoverish the psychic field even by ignoring what I'm calling common sense.

When the best in the discipline is like this, and the discipline is broken by the question that brought us into this conversation—this distrust of a language that sinks or swims in order to come to grips with something that may not be an intelligible "mechanism"—then, I think, the binary opposition between the criticism of ordinary language and the need to go public, claimed by our neck of the woods, becomes a bit risible.

I notice in rereading that I have bypassed the question of the left. Why have we identified "the left" with simplemindedness? The teaching rôle of the left intellectual is an economy of the uncanny, making the familiar unfamiliar enough so that critical practice can happen. But that is simply to prepare the field. Is that enough? That leads to another conversation.

Notes

1. This interview took place at Columbia University, New York, August 20, 2000.
2. "Moving at Both Ends of the Spectrum: A Conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," interview by Lopamudra Basu. The interview took place four months prior to this one, and is posted at the Barnes and Noble Web site: <http://www.bn.com/>. It is accessible via the link "Interviews and Essays, Read More From the Author" from Barnes and Noble's web page for Spivak's book, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.
3. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "From Haverstock Hill Flat to U.S. Classroom: What's Left of Theory?" in *What's Left of Theory? New Work on the Politics of Literary Theory*, ed. Judith Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1–39.
4. CBS, August 20, 2000.
5. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym (New York: Routledge, 1990), 160.
6. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Lost Our Language—Underneath the Linguistic

Map," interview by Rainer Ganahl, in *Imported: A Reading Seminar*, Semiotext(e) 18, volume 6, issue 3 (New York: Semiotext(e), 1998), 192.

7. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, interview by Geert Lovink, ed. Linda Wallace, *Pax Electronica*, July 23, 1997.

8. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translation as Culture," in *Parallax: A Journal of Metadiscourse Theory and Cultural Practices* 14 (Jan.–March 2000): 13–34.

9. Spivak, *Post-Colonial Critic*, 150.

10. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge, Encore 1972–1973*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), 15. Originally published as *Le Séminaire, Livre XX, Encore, 1972–1973* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), 20.

11. Spivak, "From Haverstock," 33.

12. Spivak, *Post-Colonial Critic*, 134.

13. Spivak, "From Haverstock," 1.

14. Ibid.

15. Spivak, *Post-Colonial Critic*, 103.