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Article

2011

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How to cite

SWIFT, Simon. The lesson of Gayatri Spivak. In: Parallax, 2011, vol. 17, n° 3, p. 84–97. doi: 10.1080/13534645.2011.584420

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:124558>

Publication DOI: [10.1080/13534645.2011.584420](https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2011.584420)

The Lesson of Gayatri Spivak Simon Swift

One repays a teacher very badly if one remains nothing but a pupil
Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

“Ah, what am I?” sighed the master, shaking his head.
Henry James, “The Lesson of the Master”¹

1.

Lesson

1. The action of reading. *Obs.*
2. *Eccl.* A portion of Scripture or other sacred writing read at divine service.
3. A portion of a book or dictated matter, to be studied by the pupil for repetition to the teacher. Hence, something that is or is to be learnt.
4. A continuous portion of teaching given to a pupil or class at one time; one of the portions into which a course of instruction in any subject is divided. *To give, take lessons*: to give, receive systematic instruction *in* a specified subject. Hence occas. in text-books, a section of such length as to be studied continuously.
(*OED*)

The kind of aesthetic education that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s work comes increasingly to espouse both depends upon and challenges the definitions of “lesson” as verb and noun, as the action of reading and as a portion of a text. Her work in teacher training with subaltern communities in West Bengal, which she discusses at length in the “Righting Wrongs” chapter of *Other Asias*, finds Indian state education trapped in narrow definitions of the lesson through a fixation on the “developmental” practices of literacy and numeracy, which manifest themselves in rote learning rather than student-teacher dialogue. Spivak seeks in *Other Asias* to reformulate the lesson from the inside, both through an impassioned reimagining of the university, and a description of what would be needed to give the humanities a planetary reach.² Responding to Edward Said’s claim that ‘the American University generally [is] for its academic staff and many of its students the last remaining utopia,’ Spivak writes in “Righting Wrongs”:

[i]f one wishes to make this restricted utopianism, which extends to great universities everywhere, available for global social justice, one must unmoor it from its elite safe harbors, supported by the power of the dominant nation’s civil polity, and be interested in a kind of education for the largest sector of the future electorate of the global South – the children of the rural poor – that would go beyond literacy and numeracy and find a home in an expanded definition of a “Humanities to come.”³

The utopian space of the American university is not to be disbanded, but rather expanded by unmooring it from its elite harbour of privilege, supported by powerful nation states. The uni-directional transmission of knowledge and authority suggested by the model of the lesson as the action of (scriptural or textual) reading, the project of literacy, is supplanted in Spivak’s perpetual collapsing of learning and teaching into one another, which she figures as a training of the imagination.⁴ This is not an abandonment of the lesson as reading, but its ironic fulfilment in a pedagogy in which

the teacher is read into teaching by the student – a close reading.⁵ Describing her work in education in West Bengal's subaltern communities, Spivak makes clear that 'I am not there to study them but to learn from the children how to be their teacher.'⁶ Teaching is not the transmission of knowledge, it is rather the opposite of field anthropology, and there is undoubtedly an ethics encoded into this teaching relationship. Indeed, pedagogical ethics figures here as an understanding of teaching *as* relation, rather than the transmission of knowledge or the building of memory. Practice, writes Spivak, 'always splits open the theoretical justification' while 'ethics are a problem of relation before they are a task of knowledge.'⁷ (OA 22) In the very different pedagogical environment of his seminar of 1974, Lacan said that '[w]hat the analyst must know is how to ignore what he knows.'⁸ One crude way of formulating Spivak's achievement in pedagogy would be to say that it dislocates the kind of teaching in the humanities which refuses the position of subject presumed to know, taking it from the first world elite institution into a dialogue in subaltern space.⁹ In the process, an ethics which challenges the primacy of epistemological questions through its invocation of teaching as a relation, a perplexing encounter with difference shaped by a dysfunctional national educational system, opens out into the possibility of a wider political collectivity.

This approach works with unexpected allies. The lesson of Paul de Man, another of Spivak's teachers, famously warns that 'teaching is not primarily an intersubjective relationship between people but a cognitive problem in which self and other are only tangentially and contiguously involved.'¹⁰ I want to use the space of this essay to think about a curious paradox: that the insistence on teaching as a problem for knowledge rather than relation in the lesson of this master theorist has proved to be increasingly enabling for the lesson of his student, which describes how teacher-student relations can help to reimagine the possibility of a planetary collective. Indeed, Spivak's diligent rereadings of de Man, throughout her work, become a prime example for just this process, as de Man's writing learns, in the way that Spivak reads it, how to teach her about what the new humanities might be. To this extent, I understand the lesson of Gayatri Spivak here as what she teaches as well as how she learns, both from de Man and the subaltern child, and especially through the peculiar alliances into which, as we'll see, her work places them. De Man was worried, in late works such as *The Resistance to Theory* as well as his lecture "Kant and Schiller," about the political and ideological dangers, when reading philosophers like Kant, of a premature transition out of an epistemological examination of tropes into a program for aesthetic education. Yet Spivak's more recent work shows an increasing awareness of how de Man's own allegory of reading – which understands knowledge as perpetually interrupted by irony, or caught in a "permanent parabasis," can provide a useful model for the planetary humanities that she seeks, and that she comes herself to denominate an "aesthetic education." Where allegory, the permanent parabasis in de Man, works as 'the *undoing* [...] of understanding,' for Spivak, permanent parabasis comes to figure more and more as the requisite description for the interruptive gestures of subaltern insurgency into neo-colonial narratives of "development." This disruption depends upon de Man, as we'll see, and on a kind of reading in his way. Increasingly, Spivak works *with* de Man's idea of allegory, 'displacing the lesson of Paul de Man to another theatre.'¹¹

2.

Spivak writes in “Learning from de Man: Looking Back,” an essay drawn from a speech given at the MLA in 2003 commemorating the twentieth anniversary of de Man’s death, that the permanent parabasis ‘has become for me the description of the resistance fitting our time. I am obsessed by this. Like Freud on Oedipus, I am obliged to say, “If you think this is an *idée fixe*, I am helpless.”’¹² I want to pay attention to this obsession, this *idée fixe* about the right description for resistance, and to read it into the space of Spivak’s thinking about pedagogy. Obsession and helplessness suggests a powerful charge invested in the lesson of Paul de Man, brought on by a commitment to that lesson’s unexpected exportability into other forms of resistance (“resistance” itself being, of course, an important word in de Man’s own lexicon, where it names, among other things, a pedagogical relation to theory that embodies theory itself). As John Guillory has argued in *Cultural Capital*, the affective charge that congregates around de Man’s influence is extraordinary, and fascinating, because de Man’s explicit writing on teaching wants to ban any flow of desire, any intersubjective importance to the teaching transaction, in the name of a “strictly epistemological” lesson in scholarly reading. Yet Spivak’s “obsession” works most impressively by challenging the fascinating, icy hold of deathliness and mutilation that is produced as a legacy by de Man’s effort to silence the desiring person in the name of a “pure” interest in the rhetoric of the text and its knowledge claims. In “Learning from de Man: Looking Back,” she gives the following reading of de Man’s late essay, “Shelley Disfigured,” where de Man thinks of ‘reading as disfiguration.’ She quotes him to this effect:

“In Shelley’s absence, the task....of reinscribing the disfiguration now devolves entirely on the reader [...]” writes de Man. Like many readers of de Man, I find this relay encouraging and especially so because here the figure of interruption is taken out of the mostly verbal text into the world where things happen. Shelley’s death, which “happens” for everyone but Shelley, as de Man’s, for all others, including “me.” The examples I will append show, I hope, that by historical happenstance and “influence” I “chose” the indefiniteness of lives “to come” rather than the finitude of a death; in hindsight and in a setting-to-work, attempted to keep on substituting the “a” of “a-venir,” for the “a” of “differance.”¹³

Such a reading is a ‘possible disobedience,’ – to the early Derrida as well as to the late de Man, perhaps, and to Heidegger behind each of them- yet necessarily so; what calls the obsession forth from de Man’s text is that its death-fixation proves weirdly germane to a disruptive reading which wants to imagine a different political life of the future. The lesson of the death which is an event, albeit in the singular (only for the person who dies), offers the possibility of a collective life to come. It can be married, productively, to the Derridean conviction that ‘the instant of decision must remain heterogeneous to all knowledge as such, to all theoretical or constative determination.’¹⁴ Knowledge, Spivak argues, both for the de Man of “Shelley Disfigured” and the Derrida of *The Politics of Friendship*, is a kind of “madness.” Yet Spivak also takes a certain deManian orthodoxy at its word, that knowledge survives this madness as close reading. What de Man means by reading is, according to Spivak, ‘a transcendental deduction in the Kantian sense.’ This definition of reading as necessarily bound up with epistemological questions (even if it is not an epistemology, but rather deconstructs epistemology while continuing to warn about

the dangers of misreading philosophy's metaphors and moving prematurely out of the epistemological domain into performance, play, and education) means that any translation of it into an ethical lexicon must always appear mistaken. 'We "translate" [reading] into the ethical by putting it this way: Language asks us to forget it and do what it says.'¹⁵ This act of forgetting is precisely the source for what de Man thinks of as mistake or error. Philosophy, he writes in "Kant and Schiller," is obliged 'to take its terminology not from purely intellectual concepts but from material, sensory elements, which it then uses metaphorically and forgets that it does so.'¹⁶ In Spivak's essay on de Man 'this ethical translation is not a mistake' [like 'the famous Locke's mistake' outlined by Kant of 'tracing [...] the first endeavours of our power of cognition to ascend from individual perceptions to general concepts,'] it is what we must do.'¹⁷ The caution against translating epistemology directly into ethics, the formulation of an "aesthetic education" out of Kant's third *Critique* that was, according to de Man in "Kant and Schiller," the source of Schiller's mistaken reading of him, is not the only path that a reader of de Man might tread. Reading him against the grain, refusing the disciple's role of a careful exegesis of the master's text, Spivak finds a different lesson in de Man:

[R]eading in de Man's way, learning from him, does not oblige one to that specific instantiation [of the transcendental deduction] [...] As I look back, I at least seem not to have considered it a substantive obligation. To read the social text, taking the risk of the imperative to reference as such, tracing the production of historical referentiality, may be bolder than the purists and acolytes might imagine.¹⁸

"Reading in de Man's way" signifies both a continuing legacy and an obstruction of that legacy, a getting in its way.¹⁹ At the beginning of his essay "Literature After Theory: The Lesson of Paul de Man," John Guillory asks what, given that de Man had claimed there to be "absolutely no reason" why deconstructive practice should not be disseminated much *farther* than Milton or Dante or Hölderlin [...] could possibly retard its dissemination, or keep it close to the syllabus of de Man's own teaching, as though close to home?'²⁰ The accusation is entirely wrong if such acts of dissemination are understood as expansively as they deserve to be – the point being that a certain obvious and "pure" deManianism screens a real, bold and diversified legacy in gender and queer studies and psychoanalytic criticism as well as, in the example of Spivak, the critique of postcolonial reason. Spivak's dissemination of the message goes a long way towards turning inside out the deManian critique of referentiality in order, as I'll narrate in what follows, to think about subaltern insurgency in the Bangladeshi floodplains. This kind of disobedience, reading in de Man's way in order to court what to the master-discourse cannot but appear as a mistake, invests in the power of mistakes to activate philosophy in the world. This is a pedagogy of epistemological mistakes and errors that recognises their crucial importance to leaning; it is not a sidelining of knowledge claims in the name of an agonised ethics of responsibility and founding, but rather an activation of knowledge against its own grain.

3.

Who can say what is affectively at stake in the teacher-student relationship? Spivak's relation to de Man looked for a long time somewhat like the young author Paul Overt's relation to "the master" in Henry James's story of 1892, "The Lesson of the

Master,” which cannot help ‘revealing a part of the torment of being able neither clearly to esteem him nor distinctly to renounce him.’²¹ James’s story might conceivably be the ur-text for “The Lesson of Paul de Man,” number 69 of *Yale French Studies* which mourned de Man’s death in 1985. If so, the title compliments de Man, turning him, too, into the master.²² My own obsession was, for a long time, as a remote student of Spivak, in tracking these ambivalent revelations in her work, so oblique and, form me at least, therefore enticing in the way that they glimmer through her texts. I’ll outline some of these ambivalent revelations in what follows. Firstly, I want to think about why it is that Spivak’s work cannot stop with the de Manian commitment to the deconstruction of an epistemology of tropes out of its concern for the relations at stake in pedagogy, and to think about how her reading of Derrida moves her beyond this commitment into the issue of the collective.

Spivak’s work persistently claims that a more substantial training in the possibilities of dialogue with the subaltern can be developed through a reimagined humanities than the field work of the anthropological and social sciences, writing themselves into a benevolent narrative of “development,” can offer alone. She wants to supplement the social sciences’ approach to cultural difference with what is unique about a training in the humanities. But anthropology also appears in Spivak’s work as a kind of “philosophical mistake” – according to what de Man thinks philosophy to be – that needs to be made, in the name of recovering the foreclosure of the subaltern as the condition of possibility of what we currently mean by the humanities.

In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (which is dedicated to de Man and Tarak Neth Sen) Spivak’s pedagogical figure of the necessary mistake is most clearly worked out in a reading of Kant’s third *Critique* which visits de Man’s late, dark warning about the ideological dangers of aesthetic education. In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of a Man*, argues de Man, Schiller mishears the rhetoric of Kant’s writing on the sublime, mistaking a set of epistemological claims drawn out of Kant’s account of the aesthetic experience of the sublime for a programme for aesthetic education. Kant writes his account of the dynamic sublime, which sees the power of the imagination and the understanding acceding to the supersensible determination of practical reason in its effort to cognise a fearful natural object, in deceptively anthropomorphic terms – deceptive because Kant is talking about faculties of the mind and not real people. Spivak’s disruptive reading seeks to repeat the mistake that de Man finds in Schiller’s text. She calls her reading of Kant “‘mistaken.” ‘I believe,’ she writes, ‘there are just disciplinary grounds for irritation at my introduction of “the empirical and anthropological” into a philosophical text that slowly leads us toward the rational study of morals as such.’²³ These ‘just disciplinary grounds’ turn out to derive from a familiar de Manian warning about taking any tropological move in a text to refer to real, anthropological human conditions. De Man writes, as Spivak quotes him:

Kant was dealing with a strictly epistemological concern, with a strictly philosophical, epistemological problem, which he chose to state for reasons of his own in interpersonal terms, thus telling dramatically and interpersonally something which was purely epistemological and which had nothing to do with the pragma of relationship between human beings. Here, in Schiller’s case, the explanation is entirely empirical, psychological without any concern

for the epistemological implications [...] Schiller appears as the ideology of Kant's critical philosophy.²⁴

Kant's dynamic of the sublime is, in Spivak's reading of it, primarily a text about education which has preselected the type of subject who can train his imagination to accede to a supersensible vocation for reason out of the sensory experience of the sublime. The subaltern, man in the raw, will only ever find nature fearful, rather than sublime, and so he is the 'naturally uneducatable.' Yet de Man refuses to find any blueprint for a programme of aesthetic education in Kant. Spivak discerns here a defensiveness towards Kant, or rather an attempt to excuse: Kant "chose to state for reasons of his own" the dynamic of the sublime in interpersonal terms (excuses, of course, being a trope of primary importance to de Man). Under the pressure of the logic of her book – which wants to get the position of the subaltern to speak out of its absence in philosophical master-texts, in order, subsequently, to resist the tendency of postcolonial migrants to claim to be able to speak for her – Spivak collapses Kant's position into its deManian reading. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, the counter-reading that Spivak proposes – a "mistaken" reinscription of the anthropomorphic moment into Kant's text – is actually close to Kant's own position, in that the whole logic of the *Critique of Judgement* depends upon an inescapable anthropomorphism at the heart of our judgement of the causality of nature.²⁵ The mistake is not only not inappropriate in epistemological terms, it uncovers something important about Kant's epistemology, that is a use of anthropological metaphors that Kant makes, not for reasons of his own, but rather because the logic of his attempt to bring theoretical and practical reason together in aesthetic judgement demands it. Anthropomorphism for Kant is more than just a seductive aesthetic ideology to be resisted – a claim that is in love, perhaps, with the fetishised cognitive power of its own reading. So too, the "resistance" to anthropomorphism is not, in fact, Kantian but de Manian. Notwithstanding the title of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is de Man and not Kant who fetishises cognitive purity.

What happens in Spivak's reading of Kant's sublime is a noticing of an institutional resistance to contamination. In his reading of a differently, highly-charged student-teacher relation, the relation between Heidegger and Husserl, Derrida had noticed in *Of Spirit* an equivalent moment of institutional resistance, arguing in light of this, as Spivak has described, 'that (the thinking of) responsibility is also a (thinking of) contamination.'²⁶ Noticing this resistance enables a different approach to the philosophical tradition. A different kind of lesson emerges, one that is far more than mere symptomatology. The collapse of the Soviet Union, Spivak writes early in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, has brought neo-colonialism into 'the dynamics of the financialization of the globe.' The "great narratives" of the German philosophical tradition 'are becoming increasingly more powerful operating principles, and we in the U.S. academy are participants in it.' But a pedagogy which recognises that the drive to resist the contamination of the tradition provides a legitimating narrative for a new geo-political world order does not set out to trash the philosophical master-texts themselves. 'I keep hoping that some readers may then discover a constructive rather than disabling complicity between our position and theirs [Kant's, Hegel's, Marx's], for there often seems no choice between [de Manian?] excuses and [postcolonial?] accusations, the muddy stream and mudslinging.'²⁷

De Man's focus on the primarily cognitive status of reading is not just something to be muddled; it is also what can give form and structure to the kind of political judgements that might be needed. Spivak writes in "Learning from de Man: Looking Back":

[I]f I were committed to any and all interruptions of the hegemonic order, my politics would be different. How then make substantive judgments? That is where understanding and irony change places and understanding, mere reasonableness as our ally, itself interrupts "the state of suspended ignorance" where we "end up" if we stay with "literature and its criticism," as de Man avowedly does. In his preface [to *Allegories of Reading*], de Man diagnoses this as a "shift," not an "end," – a shift from historical definition to the problematics of reading....typical of my generation...of most interest in its results than in its causes" – careful words, camouflaging the "causes" as "uninteresting." Yet, the "pugnacious literalism" that this teacher taught makes this student sniff at those very causes: shifting a generation born in Europe in the twenties away from historical definition to a problematics of reading which, for them, remained contained within the canonical principles of literary history.

Critics have noted these words, of course, and fitted them in with other instances of contrast between history and language. No one, however, seems to have noticed that de Man is speaking not just of himself but his generation. My generation was born when de Man's generation was flirting with fascism, the uninteresting cause of a subsequent shift from history to reading. We came of age outside of Europe, when their war, where we fought for our masters, inaugurated the end of territorial imperialism. I am now nearly as old as de Man when he died. "Typical of my generation" is this concern for preserving the dreams of postcoloniality in the face of globalization.²⁸

Spivak wants to think of her relation to her teacher as a relation across generations; but it is cross-hatched with the geo-political differences that led her parents' generation to fight for their masters – a different order of complicity, contemporary with the troubling collaborations of Heidegger and de Man. Generation in teaching is always belated, defining the causes of its identity anecdotally and in gestures of "looking back," gestures which often get effaced or disguised, and that risk averting their gaze from the political humanities to come. Autobiography as de-facement, perhaps. Spivak is the student again in this piece of writing, but talking to her teacher as equal, or contemporary: his age when he died, minimal spokesperson for a generation which may, like de Man's by the end of his life, already find the project that was motivated by the conditions in which it grew up and came of age transformed before its eyes. Just as the transfer from history to reading troubled a younger generation in the early 80s, so too 'the dreams of postcoloniality' now find themselves disturbed.²⁹ This latter generation fought for its masters in order to be free of them. In *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak has written about the death of comparative literature – the discipline invented by de Man's generation, 'a result of European intellectuals fleeing "totalitarian" regimes.'³⁰ Yet *Death of a Discipline* is also an account of how comparative literature might reinvent itself with a truly planetary reach.

The deconstruction of knowledge and reference needs to be opened out into a critique of globalization in the name of a living politics of the future – the site of a collectivity to come, instead of a mournful looking back to the death of the one. Such a project needs to accede to what looks like a “mistaken” ethics from the point of view of the deconstruction of epistemology, but then to exceed that gesture too, to reinhabit the deconstruction of epistemology in order to find some kind of orientation for adequate political judgements, even as it refuses its pose of unresolvable irony. This is a project that finds its basis in literary criticism, but must not, crucially, remain restricted to the literary, precisely so that it can guard the political importance of literary studies themselves and the humanities more generally. This is so not least because other types of knowledge get produced in the politics of global development that write off the humanities into a wistful, benevolent Romanticism. The humanities must, then, guard a critical, Kantian function of subjecting forms of knowledge to critique, lest they get ghettoised into acts of mourning lost objects. This is the project of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, which opens by warning that ‘[p]ostcolonial studies, unwittingly commemorating a lost object, can become an alibi unless it is placed within a general frame.’³¹ The humanities and its institutions can also, we must believe, provide a training ground for the different kind of political life that Spivak’s work seeks out.

As early as 1980, in her review-essay of Derrida’s *Limited Inc*, “Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model,” Spivak was challenging the “irony” of de Man’s message which risks appearing as nothing more than ‘an itinerary for scepticism.’ De Man’s name is already in this essay deeply implicated in the ambiguous powers and dangers of the lesson figured as a reading. Spivak distinguishes Derrida’s early notion of writing from de Man’s idea of (capitalized) Reading, ‘his last word’ on the ‘irreducible oscillation of undecidability,’ which relates to the ‘radical alterity’ of the ‘structural unconscious,’ ‘a name for something that is at every moment decisively other yet indispensable to the production of the same, an “it” that resolutely leaves its track at every intended origin or goal.’³² Yet [i]f one examines the essential predicates of the classical concept of Reading – halfway between Speech and Writing – notions of control and privilege are not far to seek.³³

In 1980, Derrida’s development of the concept of an “affirmative deconstruction” seemed to lead away from this structuralist and linguisticist demarcation of the unconscious as reading effect towards a deconstructive praxis. Spivak’s essay is a review of *Limited Inc* and Derrida’s recent controversy with John Searle, yet it is also something of a covert review of *Allegories of Reading*, which had been published three years earlier in 1977. Without mentioning de Man by name (he figures, rather, in this essay as “Reading” – in a provocative turning-around of de Man’s own attempts to present reading as depersonalised *effet machinal*),³⁴ Spivak formulates a critical schema whereby Derrida’s ‘irreducibly fragmented, untotalizable, yet “positive” or “affirmative”’ practice is opposed to what she describes as “American deconstruction.” (100) Quoting de Man’s definition of irony as ‘the systematic undoing of understanding,’ Spivak argues that it is because of the tendency of de Man’s method to make of deconstruction an undoing of reference that ‘critics on the left and the right’ tend to see in it nothing but an ‘itinerary for scepticism.’³⁵ This version of deconstruction is allied to a certain mode of teaching and a certain institutional politics that remains blind to the traces of ideology:

Graduates and undergraduates alike seem caught in a doctrine of individual uniqueness. In a dehistoricized academy, they find no difficulty in claiming their opinions' center as their own self-possession. This is matched by the ease with which collectivities in the person are assigned centralized unitary descriptions: the fifties, the sixties, the seventies: Romanticism, structuralism, phenomenology. [...] [O]ne of the most striking characteristics of any version of advanced capitalism is the fragmentation and decentralization of the individual's putative political and economic control over her own life. One of the peculiar and paradoxical byproducts of this system is to generate a conviction of individual centrality among most members of the intellectual, bourgeois, as well as managerial classes.³⁶

Stopping short with the deconstruction of understanding, as does de Man, provides, albeit unwittingly, an ideological alibi for this individualism. It cheers up the disenfranchised individual by investing her with a charismatic power to read and dismantle the epistemology of tropes, but it disguises from her the real loss of control over the conditions of her existence wrought by late capitalism. 'The generalizable result: lack of any conceivable interest in a collective practice towards social justice.'³⁷ In contrast, the deconstructive lesson of Derrida's *Limited Inc* can 'call into question the complacent apathy of self-centralization.'³⁸ It can trouble and expose the relation between a complacent subject supposed to know, inhabiting its creativity and intellectual autonomy in the academic institution as it dismantles patterns of reference, and the real loss of individual agency under capital. What is striking about this review-essay is that it moves towards an attack on deManian reading for its unwitting participation in a particular ideological formation of knowledge in the humanities, in favour of a notion that will become much more significant in Spivak's more recent work: the classroom as site of a potential collectivity.³⁹

The title for her essay comes from a line in Derrida's *Limited Inc* about "'literatures' or 'revolutions' that as yet have no model.'⁴⁰ The elision of "literatures" from Spivak's title, and the scathing description of the state of the academy, suggests that the ideological blindnesses of the deManian method had, at this point, led to a complacent scepticism among those who might be expected to recognize and account for the ways in which their position was being manoeuvred by capital – humanities graduates. In *The Resistance to Theory* de Man in effect defines "literature" as the dismantling of a pseudo-mystical, post-Romantic aesthetic ideology that unites sign and referent. The whole purport of his deconstructive analysis is to show that language has capacities that are not dependent on material reality. 'Wherever this autonomous potential of language can be revealed by analysis, we are dealing with literariness and, in fact, with literature as the place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available.'⁴¹ This itinerary of scepticism – literature as the space in which ideological illusions about language's referential functions are laid bare – led Barbara Johnson to define teaching itself as a literary genre; the very 'agony of teaching,' she writes, bears on its perpetual testament to a certain blankness that cannot be taught. Teaching, then, 'is a compulsion: a compulsion to repeat what one has not yet understood.'⁴²

Compare this itinerary for scepticism with Spivak's more recent ab-uses of de Manian reading. The first example that Spivak gives in her "Looking Back" essay 'of the narrative lineaments of "parabasis," a legacy of my teacher' concerns peasant

insurgency in Bangladesh in 1992 interrupting the Flood Action Program. De Man's methodology is brought into dialogue with a subaltern whose autobiography is perpetually defaced. The parabasis, the insurgency, can instantiate a different kind of learning, if we know how to read it:

Count this interruption in the nature of a permanent parabasis, the peasant's rather than the philosopher's disarticulated rhetoric, a setting-to-work, not an explication, of the philosopher's dream. Ask the question again: what exactly does the fulfilled dream of Reason bring about on its way? If the subaltern offers us, say, learning, and the ecological deconstructor supplements this with internalized knowledge from the main text of knowledge about knowledge, in the absence of deep infrastructural involvement, the best it will provide, for the subaltern, is uninstructed information command, at worst, only command. Parabasis is no longer a formal possibility [...] In place of the destroyed [subaltern] culture of learning, a continually expanding amount of money continues to be spent, on the aid-debt model, to collect hydrological data, as if nothing had been known. A large section of the post-colonial subjects of Bangladesh is, of course, crazy about Geographical Information Systems, and not in the service of accountable reason. They provide the Euro-U.S. main text the opportunity to invoke "the Bangladeshis" as willing beneficiaries and silence all critique as merely romantic, humanities-based and impractical.⁴³

Such passages oppose the lesson and the possibilities of learning and understanding to a developmental fixation on knowledge and information. The problem with resting with the formal properties of the parabasis, emplotting literature as the site in which a deconstruction of a referential epistemology might be conducted, is that it may silence the critical potential of its own method. Without activation, without a deconstruction of the knowledge claims at play in the language of *development*, any resistance to development's narratives within the humanities can easily be written off as a nostalgic and romantic opposition to quantifiable knowledge, since the humanities will have delimited themselves to acts of reading in the narrow sense, mourning lost objects. This activation of the parabasis takes place, at the same time, in the name of literary criticism, as evidence of it as a key tool for political engagement. But so too, deconstruction is often put to work as an ecology that "supplements" the subaltern lesson with "internalized knowledge" from philosophy that cannot hear that lesson and issues commands instead, working with the narrative of development. The deconstructive lesson needs to be activated in the name of a possible learning from the subaltern against the dictatorship of calculable reason, even under its developmental-ecological guises. This can mean something as simple and obvious as recognising that the peasants who have worked the flood-plains for centuries understand the need for drainage, are in contact with the eco-biome in ways that the knowledge-based view of development cannot be. This is common sense, not nostalgia; but the knowledge claims of development need to be deconstructed in order for us to see it.

5.

Spivak's essay commemorating de Man's death makes a key distinction:

I am not a scholar of de Man. I am his student, perhaps his first PhD. I have not engaged with the posthumous publications much. For me the penny dropped with *Allegories of Reading*, published in 1979. I remember now with

some amusement that Michael Ryan thought I was hiding the book because I did not want to share its riches. It is this book that has become for me timely.⁴⁴

The story is partly one of hiding things, or seeming to hide them; an early response to *Allegories of Reading*, as we've seen, doesn't actually mention de Man by name. Yet the student is a different thing from the scholar, living the lesson as intersubjective relation giving the space for political activism rather than as the fetishised impersonal rigor of scholarship. De Man is in development in Spivak's writing, to help to dismantle its logic. The student, or pupil, as Nietzsche's Zarathustra has it, repays the teacher badly if she remains only a pupil.

¹ Nietzsche cited in 'In Memoriam', *The Lesson of Paul de Man, Yale French Studies* 69 (1985), pp.3-16, p.8. Henry James, 'The Lesson of the Master', in *Henry James: Complete Stories 1884-1891* ed. By Edward Said (New York: The Library of America, 1999), p.594.

² On "planetarity" as a counter-discourse to globalization, see Chapter 3 of Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia UP, 2003).

³ Gayatri Spivak, *Other Asias* (Oxford, Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), p.17.

⁴ On this training of the imagination, see the extraordinary footnote to the first essay in *Other Asias*, "Righting Wrongs," in which Spivak seeks to distinguish her position on the role of imagination in education as a 'risky othering of the self' from Martha Nussbaum's view of the literary imagination as a mode of 'sympathetic identification.' In Spivak, *Other Asias*, p.267.

⁵ In "Crossing Borders," the first chapter of *Death of a Discipline*, Spivak defends a reimagined, planetary and revitalized model of comparative literature, which demands that students learn well one of the languages of the global south, in the face of a 'monolingual, presentist, narcissistic' Cultural Studies which is 'not practised enough in close reading even to understand that the mother tongue is actively divided.' Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 2003, p.20.

⁶ Spivak, *Other Asias*, p.284.

⁷ Spivak, *Other Asias*, p.22.

⁸ Cited in Shoshana Felman, "Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable," in *The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre*, ed. by Barbara Johnson, *Yale French Studies*, No. 63 (New Haven, Conn: Yale UP, 1982), p.32.

⁹ For Spivak's own use of Lacan, particularly his argument about the transference, to dis-locate knowledge claims in literary criticism, see "The Letter as Cutting Edge", in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York and London: Routledge 1988).

¹⁰ Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis, London: U of Minnesota P, 1986), p.4.

¹¹ Gayatri Spivak, "Learning from de Man: Looking Back," *boundary 2* (Fall 2005), pp.21-35, p.28.

¹² Spivak, "Learning from de Man," p.28.

¹³ Spivak, "Learning from de Man," pp.24-5.

¹⁴ Spivak, "Learning from de Man," p.24.

¹⁵ Spivak, "Learning from de Man, p.22.

¹⁶ De Man, "Kant and Schiller," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. by Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.152.

¹⁷ Spivak, "Learning from de Man," pp.22-3.

¹⁸ Spivak, "Learning from de Man," pp.22-3.

¹⁹ Even the obstruction of de Man implied here can be construed as part of his legacy: '[t]he fact that we are so universally accused of blocking the road must indicate that, knowingly or not, we are doing something right.' De Man, "Blocking the Road: A Response to Frank Kermode," in Paul de Man, *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism: The Gauss Seminar and Other Papers*, ed. by E.S. Burt, Kevin Newmark, Andrzej Warminski (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p.193.

²⁰ See John Guillory, "Literature After Theory: The Lesson of Paul de Man", in Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1993), p.182.

²¹ Henry James, "The Lesson of the Master," in *Henry James: Complete Stories 1884-1891* ed. by Edward Said (New York: The Library of America, 1999), p.584.

²² If so, this is a rather odd compliment given that James's is a story of betrayal, the master eventually marrying the young woman he had told his disciple, Paul Overt, to renounce in order to concentrate on his writing. James, "the master" to Ezra Pound and other young Americans in Europe, is an important figure in the commemoration of de Man. John Guillory cites a passage from a text by Juliet Flower MacCannel, in which McCannel recalls de Man asking her not long before his death what she had begun working on. 'I said I had begun to take a real interest in James – *The Portrait, The Princess*,' she answers. 'His clear delight broke out – "I love Henry James."' The master disseminated his power, according to Guillory, precisely through his claim to have no more than a "strictly epistemological" interest in his relation to his students. Guillory reads this scene of pedagogy as governed by the drama of transference and countertransference – the eruption of an unutterable love between student and teacher that threatens to break the charm of the analysis or pedagogical relation by disturbing its decorum. The countertransference – the denial of this love by the master ("strictly epistemological interests") forces it to break out in anecdotes that can become public after the death of the master. Guillory writes:

What makes de Man's love for Henry James a necessary fact to relate in this context is not simply the love that exists between the disciple and the teacher, but the way in which these two "faces" are mutually averted from the fact between them. Only for this reason can de Man's love for *James*, upon which the anecdote insists, mean to the disciple, "I love you."

Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, p.183

²³ Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p.9.

²⁴ Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p.16.

²⁵ See Simon Swift, "Kant, Herder and the Question of Philosophical Anthropology," *Textual Practice* 19 (2), 2005, pp.219-238.

²⁶ Spivak, *Other Asias*, p.64.

²⁷ Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, pp.3-4.

²⁸ Spivak, "Learning from de Man," pp.34-5.

²⁹ The site of this disturbance might be found in Spivak's responses to post-nationalism, which she declares 'Northern radical chic.' (*Other Asias*, p.334). In a

conversation with Yan Hairong, Spivak writes of the need in the South to ‘reinvent the state as an abstract structure, as a porous abstract structure, so that states can combine against the deprivations of internationalization through economic restructuring.’ (*Other Asias*, p.245)

³⁰ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, p.3.

³¹ Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p.1.

³² Gayatri Spivak, “Revolutions That As Yet Have H Model: Derrida’s “Limited Inc,” in *The Spivak Reader*, 1996, p. 83.

³³ Spivak, “Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model,” pp.83-4.

³⁴ See de Man, “Excuses (*Confessions*) in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1977).

³⁵ Spivak, “Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model,” p.101.

³⁶ Spivak, “Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model,” p.101.

³⁷ Spivak, “Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model,” p.101.

³⁸ Spivak, “Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model,” p.101.

³⁹ This kind of opposition between allegories of reading and Derrida’s affirmative deconstruction survives into Spivak’s writing in the new century. See Gayatri Spivak, “Schmitt and Poststructuralism: A Response,” *Cardozo Law Review* 21 (May 2000), pp. 1723-1737, especially p.1729-30.

⁴⁰ Spivak, “Revolutions That As Yet Have No Model,” p.99.

⁴¹ De Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, p. 8.

⁴² Barabara Johnson, *The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre*, p.3.

⁴³ Spivak, “Learning from de Man,” pp.29-30.

⁴⁴ Spivak, “Learning from de Man,” p.27.