

“Soul Making: Gayatri Spivak on Upward Mobility”

Bruce Robbins
Dept of English and Comparative Literature
Columbia University
Philosophy Hall
New York, NY 10027
Phone: 212 854-6463
E-mail: Bruce.Robbins@verizon.net

Biographical Note: Bruce Robbins is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University. His most recent book is *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (NYU P, 1999).

Abstract

In a famous reading of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argued that stories about a European woman's rise to independent agency, including stories about the rise of feminism, sometimes depend upon a silent alliance with European imperialism. The present essay uses Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy and Spivak's reading of it to suggest that the powerful logic of Spivak's analysis might be carried forward and redirected, thereby making room for the upward mobility of Third World women (among others) and for the political defense of the welfare state.

Keywords

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; upward mobility; international division of labor; welfare state; feminism; Jamaica Kincaid.

Soul Making:

Gayatri Spivak on Upward Mobility

I take the phrase “soul making” from Gayatri Spivak’s classic reading of Jane Eyre, now reworked as part of chapter two of A Critique of Postcolonial Reason (1999)¹. The phrase stands for the Kantian pedagogy Jane was preparing to administer, late in the novel, if she had gone to India with St. John Rivers as a missionary instead of returning to discover the former Mrs. Rochester dead, marry Rochester, and live happily ever after. Like “childbearing,” or “domestic-society-through-sexual-reproduction cathected as ‘companionate love,’” soul making also produces subjects, but it does so by means of work, the educational work of (I quote) making “the heathen into a human so that he can be treated as an end in himself.” Spivak does not hide her view that this is a bad thing, but she has a less obvious point: it is this missionary alternative to marriage that makes the marriage to Rochester symbolically possible. By presenting the legal wife as sub-rational, on the model of the colonial primitive, and by giving Jane the ambition to convert and transform such less-than-humans, Brontë allows the imperatives governing sexuality and class to be trumped by another, higher imperative: “the imperialist project cathected as civil-society-through-social-mission.” Jane’s upward mobility can be tolerated because, in Spivak’s words, “nineteenth-century feminist individualism could conceive of a ‘greater’ project than access to the closed circle of the nuclear family. This is the project of soul making beyond ‘mere’ sexual reproduction.”²

Linking upward mobility to a detour from “sexual reproduction” was no doubt less important to Spivak than linking it to imperialism. But it is the erotic detour, momentarily abstracted from its imperialist content, that has inspired my own ongoing project on upward mobility stories. It suggests a hypothesis: that the constitutive logic of the genre, the logic that

permits and explains upward mobility, is located in “tangents” like St. John Rivers, unchosen erotic objects who are weakly desired, if at all, who (in Spivak’s words) “escape . . . the closed circle of the *narrative* conclusion” and yet are “granted the important task of concluding the *text*.”³ According to this hypothesis, such figures offer the upward mobility story a different and more intriguing terminus, even if the plot never quite goes there. The emotionally chilly man Jane doesn’t love and doesn’t marry, Rivers commands so much attention from the novel because he offers Jane what she is ready to consider meaningful and desirable work – work whose desirability for Jane comes in large part from the fact that it might not *require* marriage, indeed replaces marriage with otherwise unavailable possibilities for socially significant activity. And this is work that addresses the genre’s make-or-break question: What about those who are *not* upwardly mobile?

When Spivak warns against allowing the narrative of “eurocentric economic migration” to provide a norm for our current sense of globality, against “theories, however subtly argued, that support the idea that upward class mobility—mimicry and masquerade— is unmediated resistance” (xii), this is the question she is properly insisting on.⁴ My argument, building on hers, goes on to suggest that there might exist historically valuable if not wholly satisfying answers to this question and that they might be discovered in just those “narrative tangents” to which she points. Characters like St. John Rivers occupy the crucial space where the genre struggles to resolve its constitutive contradiction between society of origin and society of destination. Bertha Mason, in Spivak’s analysis, has the same function as Joe Gargery and the forge do in Great Expectations: they suggest that upward mobility can happen only as betrayal of those left behind. Rivers, on the other hand, has much the same function as Miss Havisham and

Magwitch, mentor/benefactors and substitute love objects (I think of Estella as an erotically acceptable disguise for the elderly Miss Havisham; in a French novel she would have been Pip's lover herself) who mediate between the world of Pip's expectations and the world of the forge, obliquely asserting that the two need not be irreconcilably opposed. Trying to compress my argument into a few sentences, I'd say that these two figures, the Older Woman and the Male Criminal, both of them excluded from sexual reproduction, stand for a whole line, from Rousseau's Mme. de Warens and Balzac's Vautrin to Horatio Alger and Hannibal Lecter, in which ambiguously non-reproductive eroticism with mentor/benefactor figures presides over upward mobility and does so in order to re-define upward mobility as something more ethically responsible than mere self-interested social climbing. On this reading, the chill that surrounds St. John Rivers and others like him corresponds to a sacrifice of immediate satisfaction on the part of the protagonist, a sacrifice of self-interest that (so I argue) is matched by a narrative impulse to spread the available quantity of satisfaction democratically outward beyond the usual restricted circle, thereby counting in the interests of the immobile. Ultimately I tie the protagonist's dependence on such mediators to the ethic of social interdependence instantiated, in the metropolis, by the institutions of the social welfare state, institutions that are both vulnerable and defensible.

While she inspired this line of argument, Spivak of course also challenges it. Her references to the welfare state tend to be reminders that, as Samir Amin and Immanuel Wallerstein have long maintained, the existence of the welfare state in the North is the definitive sign of systematic inequality between North and South (Amin, 1980; Wallerstein, 1991).⁵ Even if I am right to bring out a hidden egalitarianism in the upward mobility story, it could still be

true that the price of egalitarianism at home is imperialism abroad. More about this in conclusion.

Spivak's impatience with egalitarianism at home helps explain why she takes little pleasure in Jane's displacement of Bertha Mason, even though Bertha Mason is apparently of a higher class. Being on the privileged side of the class line means less than being on the unprivileged side of the colonial line, or what Spivak usually calls "the international division of labor." The identity conferred by the domestic division of labor (class identity) is dissolved and reshaped by the identity conferred by the *international* division of labor (colonial identity), the division of labor between nations and regions, which we must remember is not merely the same division at a larger scale but on the contrary a replacement and counter-term that shakes the orthodox, internalist, undifferentiated notion of class identity to its foundations (69).⁶ One is tempted to count Spivak's references to the international division of labor among her Marxist, economic, or anti-culturalist moments. But by the criteria of orthodox Marxism they could also be described as *anti-class* moments.⁷ The phrase international division of labor appears in the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (indeed, it appears in the sentence in which this famous question is posed) when Spivak is chastising Deleuze and Foucault, caught forever in the embarrassment of their Maoist youth, for displaying excessive reverence for the knowing subaltern.⁸ I quote: "This statement [Deleuze's "genuflection" to "the workers' struggle"] ignores the international division of labor, a gesture that often marks poststructuralist political theory" (250). Excess of loyalty to *class* is not among the usual charges brought against poststructuralism. This charge only makes sense if we recall that the struggles to which Deleuze and Foucault are referring are conducted by *European* workers. Spivak is saying, with

appropriate circumspection, that workers in the metropolis occupy an ambiguous class position; as partial beneficiaries of the core/periphery divide, a divide of which they cannot be easily or fully aware, they are not *simply* workers.

Spivak is even more circumspect in drawing out another corollary of the international division of labor. She seems unwilling to admit, except in a guardedly monitory mode, while warning against its dangers, that if the international division of labor takes political representativeness away from the working-class European, it bestows political representativeness upon the middle-class non-European. It's *only* the core/periphery disparity dictated by the international division of labor that gives the middle-class postcolonial any right at all to speak for fellow nationals, a right which a more orthodox Marxism, seeing in such a figure only another member of the bourgeoisie, would be strongly motivated to deny her. This is a large point. It explains why Spivak cannot merely dismiss but must so persistently return to the story of the "eurocentric economic migrant," the story of upward mobility and the vexed question of who else, if anyone, is carried along or represented in that upward mobility. By blurring class identities, the international division of labor makes the upward mobility story genuinely interesting. To be precise, it suggests the possibility that upward mobility stories may not after all be built on the absolute necessity of betraying and sacrificing some Bertha Mason, some representative of Third World indigeneity.

Spivak rejects the idea that she and her fellow diasporic intellectuals can be considered not guilty but lucky. But it is a weak rejection. I quote: "Postcolonial persons from formerly colonized countries are able to communicate to each other (and to metropolitans), to exchange, to establish sociality, because we have had access to the so-called culture of imperialism. Shall

we then assign to that culture a measure of ‘moral luck’? I think there can be no doubt that the answer is ‘no.’ This impossible no to a structure that one critiques and yet inhabits intimately is the deconstructive position, of which postcoloniality is a historical case” (191). Rather than a paralyzingly purist or theological anguish in the face of the capital O Other, I prefer to think of deconstructive ethics as just this acknowledgment of dirty hands that can never be cleaned. Upward mobility stories as well are about inhabiting, intimately and dirty-handedly, a structure that one also critiques, being unable to say a simple “no” to “moral luck.” Like the more dramatic distances of transnational geography, they too offer a historical context for deconstructive ethics.

Bernard Williams, whose essay on moral luck Spivak cites several times, is like her a critic of Kantian ethics, and his insistence that moral choices are made amid “elements which are essential to the outcome but lie outside their control” (1993), elements however that will go on to constitute who we are (this is what makes luck moral), could pass with non-experts as a version of the deconstructive position. (The relation between Williams and Spivak would be worth another paper.) And, oddly enough, what to make, ethically speaking, of a “success story” is also the question Williams addresses in working out his theory of moral luck. His example is the painter Gauguin. I quote Williams’s editor, Daniel Statman: “Gauguin, a creative artist, abandoned his wife and children to live a life in which, so he supposed, he could pursue his art. He believed that only by going alone to Tahiti, turning away from his obligations to his family, could he realize his gifts as a painter. Now, according to Williams, whether this choice can be justified depends primarily on Gauguin’s *success*. If he failed, it would become clear that he had no basis for thinking that he was justified in acting as he did. But, argues Williams, ‘whether he

will succeed cannot, in the nature of the case, be foreseen'. . . . Therefore, at the time of the choice, Gauguin had to rely on factors that were beyond his control. Obviously one's will, strong as it might be, is not sufficient to make one a great artist. Much more is needed, in particular talent and inspiration. Hence the justification of Gauguin's decision depends on factors that are a matter of luck" (1993).⁹

In the "Preface" to A Critique of Postcolonial Reason, Spivak describes the argument of the Jane Eyre chapter as a "lesson" in how *not* to present "the ethics of alterity as a politics of identity." "Today," she goes on, she "would have added" Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy to this argument, for Lucy claims "the right/responsibility of loving, denied to the subject that wishes to choose agency from victimage" (x).¹⁰ Lucy's success story is just the sort of migration narrative about which Spivak is elsewhere quite severe. The people Lucy is learning to love are largely white representatives of the metropolitan world for which she has abandoned Antigua. Speaking a bit crudely, one might translate this rejection of victimage in favor of loving as a positive embrace by the "eurocentric economic migrant" of her upward mobility story, an embrace in which Kincaid and Spivak now seem to join.

When Lucy thinks about the meaning of her migration, she too, like Bernard Williams, thinks of the example of Gauguin. She thinks of

some paintings by a man, a French man, who had gone halfway around the world and had painted pictures of the people he found living there. He had been a banker living a comfortable life with his wife and children, but that did not make him happy; eventually he left them and went to the opposite part of the world, where he was happier. I don't know if Mariah meant me to, but I identified with the yearnings of this man; I understood finding the place where you were born an unbearable prison and wanting something completely different from what you are familiar with, knowing it represents a haven" (95).¹¹

One page after this passage, which occurs in a chapter called “Cold Heart,” Lucy is taken to a party in a bohemian setting where she will almost immediately feel both comfortable and sexually excited. The guests are artists, or as she says, “in the position” of artists, “a position that allowed for irresponsibility,” like that of “the man whose paintings hung in the museum that I liked to visit” (98). She likes the host, and she describes her feeling as follows: “This is usually the moment when people say they fall in love, but I did not fall in love. Being in such a state was not something I longed for . . . the question of being in love was not one I wanted to settle then; what I wanted was to be alone in a room with him and naked” (100).

With or without Lucy’s references to Jane Eyre, we can perhaps think of the bohemian host as her St John Rivers— a Rivers in a story without a Rochester. If Rochester is the reward for Jane’s personal effort and merit, this alternative bond between the powerful and the subaltern embodies, rather, the “irresponsibility” and impersonality of luck, which is to say of society itself in its most democratically open mode, flaunting those elements beyond the protagonist’s control that do not express her although they help determine success or failure.¹² The move is from one form of responsibility, the tight individualism of work ethic and self-reliance, to another, which acknowledges almost infinite social interdependence and in the eyes of self-reliance will thus look like happy-go-lucky irresponsibility. That’s why artists, like the ethnic underclass, are forever being asked why they don’t go out and get a job. The libidinal extension of Lucy’s identification with Gauguin, this bohemian scene leads out of romantic passion and into a cooler, more collective sort of feeling, feeling diluted by an uncontrollable democratic reference to other scenes and other people. As Lucy puts it elsewhere, “I said goodbye to Hugh, though he did not know it. . . . As I kissed [him], my tongue reaching to caress the roof of his

mouth, I thought of all the other tongues I had held in my mouth in this way” (82).

In a recent reading of Lucy, Spivak quotes this chilly passage as a symptom of “withdrawal from affective connectives” (2000). Lucy thinks, falsely for Spivak, that emotional withdrawal is a solution to hating and loving both her mother and her white mistress-- in brief, a solution to the diasporic dilemma that Spivak explains as “enter[ing] the conquering class at the expense of someone she knows” (2000). By reformulating this as the question of whether the subaltern can love, and by pointing it toward eventual if still postponed resolution in “access to the subjectship of loving” (2000), it seems to me that Spivak has gestured toward something like my own argument linking upward mobility to the cooler, less satisfying brand of love, still compromised by hierarchy and injustice, that is historically embodied in the welfare state.

Had I more time, I would want to talk about Lucy’s (and Kincaid’s) brothers, whose favoring by the mother is offered as the rationale for Lucy’s upward mobility narrative but who also come to figure, like so many other siblings, those who are left behind by the upward mobility story and who must be somehow factored in again in order for it to achieve resolution. (My Brother, published in 1997, continues the same wrestling with love and responsibility across the international division of labor that divides her family.) Instead I’ll make two quick concluding points.

Point one: “soul making” is obviously a description of our work as well as Jane Eyre’s, that is, the teaching of culture to those who must be assumed to lack it, or subject-formation in the domain of civil society cathected as social mission. I’ve been trying to establish that soul making in this sense is part of the history that has brought us the welfare state, which must be

seen as an adventurous and incomplete project – not a collection of empty administrative mechanisms, but a re-channeling of risky and ethically unpredictable desires, erotic and otherwise, that challenges all our skills in the analysis of narrative and metaphor. In the era of so-called welfare reform, among other indignities, this struggle for common sense is obviously ongoing. And it is also (this is point #2) worthy of our efforts, despite the reasonable fear that it will only help consolidate the international division of labor. In his book Mirages and Miracles, Alain Lipietz concludes that “the classical theory that imperialism reproduces dependency and an International Division of Labor with a center-periphery division between the manufacturing and primary sectors is both realistic and contingent” (1987).¹³ It’s realistic because this is what really happened at a given historical moment. It’s contingent because “it is true only of one period”; it is not a “*logic*” that can be permanently generalized, but “one of ‘History’s chance discoveries”” (Lipietz, 1987). Lipietz illustrates this openness to chance (a theme on which Spivak and Bernard Williams would presumably agree) with the example of “peripheral Fordism,” the brief but telling appearance on the other side of the international division of labor of what I have been calling the welfare state. If he is right, then it follows that there can be no assumption of zero-sum necessity according to which a postcolonial migrant’s upward mobility can only happen at the expense of someone at home whom she might know. And at the level of our political tasks, it follows that there is no absolute or paralyzing contradiction between the defense of the welfare state here in the metropolis, which includes the defense of the university, and the effort to extend its benefits and protections to those non-metropolitan spaces where they are so sorely needed. This effort, stretching the sense of the common beyond the borders of the nation, always runs the risk of making us “play [in Spivak’s words] ‘Madeline Albright to the

bombing of the Balkans” (355). But it is arguably also the only way to create an American public opinion that will one day stand in the way of future bombing.

Notes

1. Cited hereafter in text by page number alone.

2. The argument here calls for the ideology of class, as well as the ideology of sexuality, to be trumped by the ideology of imperialism. The essay elides the class aspect, but the book version comments on the elision. The priority of "text" over "narrative" is the priority of soul-making over childbearing, or imperial expansion over sexual reproduction. Transgressing the norm in one domain (the sexual) can be permitted because of service rendered in another (the imperial). In other words, it appears that for Spivak there exists a common site or currency on or in which these claims can be measured against each other. The intriguing possibility that cultural interpretation, perhaps especially on the subject of sex, might require the hypothesis of a totalizing agency which balances, as it were, the different claims, a sort of central clearing house that sets different values on different transgressions, suggests a way out of the reciprocally respectful but perhaps over-abstract equality between gender, race, and class.

3. I draw here on an argument first outlined in my "Murder and Mentorship: Advancement in The Silence of the Lambs" (Robbins 1995).

4. The phrase "upward mobility" figures with a strange prominence in Spivak's

arguments. On the same page, she claims, unlike other critics of metropolitan postcolonialism, “a productive acknowledgment of complicity” (xii). “Feminism within the social relations and institutions of the metropolis has something like a relationship with the fight for individualism in the upwardly class-mobile bourgeois cultural politics of the European nineteenth century” (148). Within the arena of “tertiary education in literature, the upwardly mobile exmarginal, *justifiably* searching for validation, can help commodify marginality” (170). She also describes “the mainstream project of Western feminism” as one that “both continues and displaces the battle over the right to individualism between women and men in situations of upward class mobility” (282).

5. Samir Amin, who seems to be Spivak’s main source, argues in Class and Nation that there has been a “social-democratic alliance” between the metropolitan bourgeoisie, the affluent metropolitan working class (cut off from unprivileged minorities, women, etc), and the satellite/comprador bourgeoisie at the periphery (1980).

6. On page 69 of A Critique, Spivak begins a footnote of almost a page and a half explaining that the international division of labor does not reflect, cannot be derived from, is not a mere extension of, the social division of labor of which Marx spoke. When Balibar describes “the term ‘proletariat’ [as] only connot[ing] the ‘transitional’ nature of the working class,” Spivak takes his description as “the moment where the Marxian text transgresses its own protocols—so far as Balibar is our guide— so that it can be turned around and let the subaltern (who is not coterminus with the proletariat) enter in the colonial phase, and today make room

for the globe-girdling nationalist-under-erasure Southern (rather than only the Eurocentric migrant) subject who would dislocate Economic Citizenship by constant interruption.”

7. This is indeed the purpose for which the concept of the international division of labor was introduced. In addition to the modified dependency theory of Amin, who uses the phrase consistently, see Immanuel Wallerstein, “Class Conflict in the Capitalist World-Economy”: “At a certain level of expansion of income and ‘rights,’ the ‘proletarian’ becomes in reality a ‘bourgeois,’ *living off the surplus-value of others*, and the most immediate effect of this is on class consciousness” (1991). Robert Brenner’s charge against Wallerstein is that he equates “capitalism with a trade-based division of labor,” thereby imitating not Marx but Adam Smith (1977). The key to this “neo-Smithian Marxism” is its subsumption of “class relations within the broader . . . development of a trade-based division of labor” (Brenner 1977). “The dynamic of development clearly resides in trade, not in . . . class relations” (Brenner 1977).

8. The title question, “can the subaltern speak?”, is in fact asked with regard to the challenge to speech posed most unambiguously not by “discourse” but by the international division of labor. The sentence comes at the end of the essay, and it begins, “On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak?*” (269).

9. Williams says this about Gauguin: “in such a situation the only thing that will justify his choice will be success itself. If he fails . . . then he did the wrong thing.” But this doesn’t

mean he can justify himself *to others*. “Even if he succeeds, he will not thereby acquire a right that they accept what he has to say: if he fails, he will not even have anything to say” (1993). “Granted that Gauguin offended a certain conception of the ethical in abandoning his family,” David Statman writes, “it is still far from certain that we would like to condemn him for that when taking into account his great success as a painter. Gauguin encourages us to put a limit to the ‘imperialist’ character of ethical concerns, which seek to invade the whole practical realm” (1993). As Statman notes, Thomas Nagel objects that “if success does not permit Gauguin to justify himself to others, but still determines his most basic feelings, that shows only that his most basic feelings need not be moral” (1993). In other words, the desire to be a successful painter is simply not moral. To which Williams responds, in a Postscript, that the force of the example for him was precisely that it did make a moral claim. “I took the case of artistic activity because the products of that activity, not least in a ‘romantic’ or bohemian form, are things that people concerned about the ethical . . . often take to be valuable” (Statman, 1993). This is of course very close to the question that those of us who live off literature, art, culture must ask ourselves, and that Spivak has specialized in helping us ask: is there something ethically “valuable” in our own “artistic activity” that offsets or changes our sense of privilege and betrayal?

10. Jane Eyre is the contrasting term, standing for the implication of imperialism in the story of metropolitan subject-formation and upward mobility—specifically, “progressive” or transgressive subject formation, since the key example is feminism.

11. Compare: “Gauguin might have been a man who was not at all interested in the claims on him, and simply preferred to live another life, and from that life, and perhaps from that preference, his best paintings came” (Williams 1993). This is Williams speaking, but to my ear at least, it might have been Kincaid.

12. The “irresponsibility” mantra of the welfare state is nicely articulated by therapist Robin Williams’s climactic words to Matt Damon in another upward mobility story, the film Good Will Hunting: “it’s not your fault.”

13. Empirically, there is no doubt that the international division of labor exists. All you have to do is compare income or life expectancy figures for Sweden and Sierra Leone. On the conceptual level, however, this way of naming global injustice remains open to question. See also Alfredo C. Robles, Jr., French Theories of Regulation and Conceptions of the International Division of Labour.

References

Amin, Samir (1980) Class and Nation. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Brenner, Robert (1977) "The Origins of Capitalist Development: a Critique of Neo-Smithian Marxism." New Left Review 104 (July-August) 25-92.

Brontë, Charlotte (1993) Jane Eyre c1847. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dickens, Charles (1994) Great Expectations c1860-61. New York: Oxford University Press.

Kincaid, Jamaica (1990) Lucy. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

– (1997) My Brother. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Lipietz, Alain (1987) Mirages and Miracles: The Crises of Global Fordism. Trans. David Macey. London: Verso.

Robles, Jr., Alfredo C. (1994) French Theories of Regulation and Conceptions of the International Division of Labour. London: St Martin's Press.

Robbins, Bruce (1995) "Murder and Mentorship: Advancement in The Silence of the Lambs." The UTS Review 1(1) 30-49, and (1996) boundary 2 23(1) 71-90.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (1999) A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

– (1995) "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.) The Post-Colonial Studies Reader. London: Routledge, 24-28.

– (2000) "Thinking Cultural Questions in 'Pure' Literary Terms." In Paul Gilroy, Lawrence Grossberg, and Angela McRobbie (eds.) Without Guarantees: In Honor of Stuart Hall. London: Verso, 335-357.

Statman, Daniel (1993) "?? ." In Moral Luck. Albany: SUNY Press, 255 ?

Wallerstein, Immanuel (1991) "Class Conflict in the Capitalist World-Economy." In his and Etienne Balibar. Race Nation Class: Ambiguous Identities. London: Verso, 115-124.

Williams, Bernard (1993) "Moral Luck." in Daniel Statman (ed.) Moral Luck. Albany: SUNY Press.

Good Will Hunting (1997) Dir. Gus Van Sant Jr., Miramax.