Book Reviews

Coral Ann Howells, *Private and Fictional Words: Canadian Women Novelists of the 1970s and 1980s*. London: Methuen, 1987. pp. 229. £6.95 pb.

The excellence of fiction written by Canadian women is an internationally acknowledged and admired phenomenon. It rests not only on the reputation of a few celebrities like Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood or Alice Munro, but it is founded on a broad basis of literature written by women writers living within Canada or as expatriates abroad.

Coral Ann Howells, an Australian teaching Canadian Literature at the University of Reading, U.K., sets out to map this "exciting new territory of commonwealth literature and to examine the ways in which these women's Canadianness informs their fiction" (1). Her readings vary according to her subject matter, and she draws theoretically from reader response theory, myth criticism (still so very prominent in Canadian literary criticism) and she also includes some thematic structural criticism.

In her "Introduction" (1-10) she points out the parallels between the anticolonialist struggle for national identity and self-determination and the feminist struggle for gender self-identity and female independence. In Canadian fiction by female authors often nationalism and feminism coincide, and stories of exploration and survival celebrate female heroism, often revising traditionally dominant genre codes. Howells's first chapter, "Canadianness and Women's Fiction" (11-32) provides the historical, literary and theoretical context for her study, establishing "wilderness" as the "dominant cultural myth" (11), a wilderness that is both external and geographic, as well as internal and psychic — thus "wilderness" may be thematized as a potential alternative to urban dwelling or, as in the quest-motifs of Atwood's *Surfacing* or Engel's *Bear*, wilderness may provide a metaphor of psychic, inner exile from which the heroines re-emerge with renewed strength. The three great Canadian literary ancestors, Susanna Moodie, Catharine Parr Traill and Anna (Brownell) Jame-

son, provide women writers with three "archetypal" modes of female discourse: the female gothic tradition, the female adaptations of male models of struggling for survival, and the inward quest-motif. Drawing on a multiplicity of codes, feminist writers use split level discourses that throw established literary traditions and authority open to question, while at the same time drawing on various female literary traditions. Thus, Howells points out, women writers tend to question established authority, paying more attention to "what has been traditionally seen/unseen as marginal, questioning the stereotype images and narratives of their culture together with the language of its value judgements" (27), in words that are both "private and fictional," as Margaret Laurence expressed it in *The Diviners*, — a phrase Howells picked out for a suitable title of her study.

Having set her stage, Howells then analyzes individual works by eleven contemporary Canadian women authors, four of them in separate chapters of their own (Laurence, Atwood, Munro, Gallant), the remaining authors in joint chapters, combining Engel with Kogawa and Turner Hospital, Thomas with Barfoot, and Hébert with Blais. She begins her analysis with the greatest Canadian novelist, Margaret Laurence (33-52), comparing *A Bird in the House* with *The Diviners*. Howells sees the Manawaka novels as successful attempts of a Canadian female author to claim her own cultural inheritance through writing (a) personal memories, (b) local history, and (c) the legends of that community. Both her sequence of thematically related short stories and her modernist novel weave easily between the Now and the Then, but whereas *A Bird in the House* concentrates on three crucial years in Vanessa's life (age 10-13), when the death of her father changed her whole life and dispossessed her of her home, Morag Gunn's inward journey in *The Diviners* examines not only her own history but is also a theoretical exploration of subject and object and the nature of reality. Both Vanessa and Morag Gunn combine their childhood and juvenile voices with their present adulthood, both re-establish their inheritance and their identity through writing fiction. At the core of *The Diviners*, Howells sees the multiplicity of that novel as symbolized by the river which seems to be flowing in both directions at the same time, encompassing the Scottish and the Métis inheritance, — a "weight" from which "Pique suffers . . . , having to serve as role model for a Canadian multi-ethnic future" (51). For Morag Gunn as for the heroines of Atwood's *The Edible Woman* and Barfoot's *Dancing in the Dark* psychic insurrection is her theme, and as in many other contemporary novels by women writers, the writing process itself becomes the means of liberation, while causing additional problems such as interrupting and being interrupted by household chores.

In the third chapter (53-70) Howells analyzes Margaret Atwood's *Bodily Harm* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Both novels share in the gothic, but whereas *Bodily Harm* is a fictional revision of the gothic romance as a genre, *The Handmaid's Tale* enters into a revision of the utopian or rather dystopian genre of science fiction. The Canadianness of *Bodily Harm* is rooted not only in the origin of the central character and the gothic Toronto episodes, but likewise in Atwood's use of the "wilderness" theme as both inward (psychic fear, cancer) and external (Caribbean politics, terrorism). While her Caribbean ordeal strips Rennie of her white middle-class security, Atwood makes it quite clear that even in Toronto for a woman such security is never secure. In *The Handmaid's Tale* the loss of security is even more profound, and, again, the "wilderness" exists in various forms, permeating a novel which Howells sees as comprising several literary traditions, i.e. "dystopia, historical novel and satiric comment on contemporary North American society" (67). Both novels, Howells concludes, "may be read as celebrations of the human spirit and demonstrations of the necessity for a politics of survival" (70).

Alice Munro's "extraordinary clarity of insight into women's experience" is the subject of Howell's fourth chapter (71-88), in which she describes realism vs. fantasy as the two opposing "kinds of discourse" between which Munro makes up her fictional text "which is still less than the complexity of reality itself" (78). Howells analyzes *Lives of Girls and Women* and *The Beggar Maid*, following the pervading sense of the gothic in them, caused by the feeling that beneath outward appearances and pleasant surfaces there lurks another reality that is both violent and attractive — an attractiveness that also is an important ingredient of female sexual fantasies as treated so perceptively by Munro. The "Canadianness" of Mavis Gallant's *Home Truths* (89-105), according to Howells, lies in her treatment of displacement, exile and loss of identity, particularly through loss of language, and the author convincingly concludes that Gallant's "expatriate perspective might be seen as an extraordinarily clear demonstration of that fissured pluralistic view of reality so characteristic of Canadian writing" (105).

In her longest chapter (106-138) Howells treats Marian Engel's *Bear*, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, and Janet Turner Hospital's *The Ivory Swing* as exploring female versions of the wilderness theme through (a) female sexual fantasies, (b) revisionist prairie historical fiction, and (c) female quest narrative, respectively. While *Bear* presents a rehabilitation of pornography for women, the sexual quest is only the psychic and inner exploration of an outward geographical "wilderness" of which the bear is representative. Moreover, the bear's silence and passivity make him an ideal sexual object in a

woman's quest for sexual power and domination, and his importance in northern shamanism adds a mythic literary dimension to the book. In Joy Kogawa's autobiographically based prairie novel, her revision of Canadian history centres on love, rather than revenge, as the only possible mode to live on after Hiroshima and Japanese-Canadian resettlement programs during World War II. Howell's analysis of *The Ivory Swing*, then, stresses the importance of Janet Turner Hospital's work as a popular fiction catering to the needs of readers to negotiate between the exotic and the familiar, between realism and escapist fairy tales, while criticizing Turner's presentation of India as an exotic backdrop not understood by the author.

With *Les Nuits de l'Underground* by Marie-Claire Blais and *Heloïse* by Anne Hébert, Howells returns to the theme of marginality in French Canadian fiction: marginality not so much as a linguistic but rather as an ideological problem. The novel *Les Nuits de l'Underground* deals with the enforced marginality of outspoken lesbianism as a celebration of female freedom that is paradoxically limited to the clandestine world of the "Underground," a bar for female homosexuals. Anne Hébert's gothic novella explores the marginality of a female vampire, Heloïse, a "survivor" of the 12th century French tale of forbidden love, "Heloïse and Abelard," thus celebrating "the memory of a passionate woman through the kind of revisionist history which is such an important feature of modern feminism" (182).

In her "Conclusion" (183-187) Howells returns to her initial thesis that Canadian women novelists deal with female inheritance and the relationship between nationality and gender. Like the novels analysed, Howell's book ends in multiplicity rather than in a monolithic definition of "either Canadianness or women's writing, but rather an open mesh of fictional responses to the influences that have shaped national and gender awareness in a number of individual writers" (183).

Coral Ann Howells's *Private and Fictional Words* is a very scholarly work that is both well researched and very well written in the best English essayist tradition. Its emphasis is less on the contents of novels or their social and historical referents but rather on questions of style, levels of discourse, mythic qualities and structural genre-specifics and techniques of narrative that are seen as characteristic of women's fiction. The book does not attempt to give a comprehensive overview, nor is it addressed to newcomers to the fascinating field of the female tradition in Canadian letters, but it is rather a highly informed, perceptive, specialized and detailed reading of selected texts by individual authors whose Canadianness and feminism have attracted the author's special attention. While there is some thematic criticism the main interest is on inner-literary ques-

tions, and, polemically, the book may be read as yet another example of a return to intrinsic literary criticism that steers clear of overt political and ideological ties. However, as long as literary criticism and history are largely dominated by male scholars and traditions, all revisionist readings of literature by women are politically charged as such, addressing one — if not the — great dividing line along which power is distributed, besides economy. However, even in multi-ethnic Canada, the English-French duality provides an inadequate paradigm for cultural diversity, and besides Joy Kogawa's important novel *Obasan* no works of minority authors are mentioned, nor is the issue of racial antagonisms addressed in great detail in those works where it is one central issue, i.e., in *Diviners* or *Bodily Harm*. The question of capitalizing the term "Black" when referring to people of African descent, or whether to use the term "Negro" (170) without inverted commas, may be ideologically disputable, but to list "indigenous Indians" syntactically *au par* with "wild beasts" as representing two kinds of dangers emanating from Canada as "a hostile terrain" (14) betrays an imperceptiveness even of a feminist critique towards the indigenous population of a continent colonized by Europeans. Unfortunately, such "imperial imperceptiveness" towards the dispossessed is no isolated phenomenon: In *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, Margaret Atwood does the same, listing Indians as among the "things we encountered when we first arrived here" (*Survival*, 111). Without taking into consideration the native contribution to Canadian culture at large, without addressing the occurrence or the absence of native themes in Canadian literature, a revisionist reading will displace yet another important aspect of Canadian identity. Like no other Canadian women author, Margaret Laurence was painfully aware of the native presence and displacement, and in her works she opened up successfully a comprehensive line of discourse including issues of gender as well as class and race. In Engel's *Bear* the native theme comes in through the bear and his keepers, and in Aritha van Herk's *The Tent Peg* the native theme is far more prominent than the mythic appearance of the female bear or the Dene-bouncer Zeke would betray. Unfortunately the Indian, Métis or Inuit issue in Canadian fiction by women is not addressed, van Herk's works are not included, nor are the writings of Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton, Bobbi Lee or Eleanor Brass. However, as said before, the book does not attempt to be a comprehensive study, and mentioning this "gap" is not an intra-literary but rather a social and psychological comment.

For me, the greatest strength in this enlightened and enlightening study lies in the author's perceptiveness towards feminist and gender specific issues and aesthetics, towards the essential multiplicity in

Canadian culture, and towards the essential affinity between sexism and imperialism (to which racism may be added). Howells covers a wide range of texts in a superbly written series of essays on Canadian literature. There are several repetitions, but they do not stand out awkwardly but rather make it easier to remember central messages. The biographical sketches of authors, the bibliographies of primary sources by all authors included as well as the comprehensive index make the book an up-to-date, reliable and informative source of reference, and it provides an excellent guideline for approaching and continuing the study of fiction by Canadian women.

In her final chapter, Coral Ann Howells quotes *Dancing in the Dark*, the best novel of Joan Barfoot, who is perhaps the most perceptive and I think the most promising female Canadian novelist of recent years,

> "What good is it to know these things now?
> I cannot say. But I keep busy, I write on." (187)

After having read Coral Ann Howells's book, I feel I can say, what good it is to know the things she has to say about contemporary Canadian fiction by women — and I'll read on.

Universität Osnabrück (West Germany) HARTMUT LUTZ

John Haynes, *African Poetry and the English Language*. London: Macmillan, 1987. pp. viii, 165. £3.95.

Discourse analysis, linguistics, and Marxism provide the three potent systems controlling John Haynes's study of African poems. In each of the ten chapters of *African Poetry and the English Language* he considers one or more African poems with the aid of one or more of these systems. His theory of discourse analysis is largely derived from Labov and Pratt; his linguistics from Halliday; and his Marxism from sources other than the naïve socialist realist school. The book should thus be of interest not only to students of African poetry but also to those readers anxious to see examples of the intelligent application of contemporary theory to contemporary texts.

The level at which discussion occurs varies throughout the book. Some chapters would work well at undergraduate level; others would, I think, prove too difficult. For pedagogical purposes there are a few minor problems, chiefly with terminology. Although Haynes has provided a useful "Glossary of Terms drawn from Linguistics" some of the definitions are themselves unnecessarily jargon-ridden, with the terms used for definition not themselves defined. The most unfortunate terminological example is the idiosyncratic

and unhelpful usage of "clause" (itself not defined) which appears to be derived from a misunderstanding of Halliday. Another unfortunate example is the intonation patterns supplied, which are frequently vitiated by being applied to uncontextualized single words and by a strange misconception about the frequency of a rise-fall pattern.

Haynes's book is an engaging example of that kind of contemporary criticism which chats to the reader and the text about the self, the text, and the world. Haynes reveals himself as a committed Marxist, concerned with the spread of this ideology in society and in pedagogy. When discussing Mazisi Kunene, for instance, he frankly admits that "I have not been able to hide a bias towards the more radically socialist wing of the ANC." His own bias can be a powerful aid to interpretation. It can also lead him into error, as when he says that Kunene's *Emperor Shaka the Great* is dedicated to Gatsha Buthelezi. He wants to show that Kunene is ideologically unsound, but this is false evidence: the poem is actually "Dedicated to all the heroes and heroines of the African continent and all her children who shall make her name great." Buthelezi's name appears in the Preface to the poem, coming first in a list of people rather fulsomely praised by Kunene; part at least of the praise must be attributed to Zulu etiquette.

The intrusion of ideology occasionally has risible effects, particularly when Haynes, against his better judgment, drops back into crude materialism. He quotes, for instance, the lines from *Emperor Shaka the Great* describing the preparations for Shaka's inauguration where "Beautiful women . . . reaped and crushed the fragrance of young scented flowers." He crossly comments: "There is no close focus on the labour required to gather all these flowers, nor on the real prospects of these young women as members of Shaka's seraglio — to become one of hundreds of closely watched 'sisters' with no prospect of normal family or sexual life, nor of (surviving) children."

It is, however, less than just to Haynes to concentrate on one of the weaker chapters in a constantly interesting and provocative book. The chapters in which he discusses poems by Christopher Okigbo, Mongane Serote, and Willie T. Zingani are excellent. Even when discussing poets more resistant to his theory or in applying those parts of his theory in which he is less skilled — the chapters on Wole Soyinka, Kofi Awoonor, Okot p'Bitek, Idi Bukar, or Sipho Sepamla exemplify one or both of these problems — he moves easily between theory and example, often illuminating his theory even when his eye does not seem well focused on the text.

As a result, *African Poetry and the English Language* contains many passages of engagement with major questions. There is a run-

ning opposition to what Haynes regards as the simple-minded and limiting indigenous prejudices of Chinweizu. There is an anti-Whorfian discussion of the cultural resources and limitations inherent in language and language choice. The relationship between orality and literacy is the subject of a number of original insights. And there are useful discussions of the possible models for the act of presenting a poem: conversation, the conversational turn, and dramatic presentation in particular.

If Haynes sometimes seems the victim of his systems, inclined at times to force analyses into rigid diagrams without gaining any advantage, his work is redeemed by his eclecticism; his concern to apply theory and to use texts to strengthen theory; his pedagogical enthusiasm; and his good humour. *African Poetry and the English Language* is a lively and alert discussion, a model on many pages of how literary debate and analysis can most helpfully be conducted.

University of Queensland KEN GOODWIN

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. New York: Methuen, 1987. pp. xxii, 309. $31.95.

Although it is only in one of the essays that comprise this volume that Gayatri Spivak alerts the reader to her inclusion of a "blueprint of an interminable analysis" (110), it may be seen as a blueprint cum "itinerary telescoped into the text" (110) which shapes and directs the entire collection. This could hardly be otherwise, given the deconstructive bent of her writing for, as she admits, it is the reversal/displacement schema peculiar to deconstruction (103) that demands the persistent questioning of all forms of centrism and the acts of marginalisation on which they depend. For Spivak (as for Jacques Derrida) the marginal represents that which is "chased off limits"[1] (repressed or excluded from a text or discourse or system of thought), yet which, upon close scrutiny, may prove to be not a poor relation in the power hierarchy but an undeniable inhabitant of the "core" itself.

In "Explanation and Culture, Marginalia" (the essay referred to above), Spivak arms herself with "feminist," "deconstructivist" "explanatory labels" (103), making use of complementary strategies from feminism and deconstruction to shed light on the repressive politics ("masculist and technocratic" 110) by which authority structures, including those bound up with the proceedings of an academic conference, are informed. It is by way of alluding to her "role at the Explanation and Culture Symposium" (103) in terms of her commitment toward effecting revisions and displacements

upon hierarchical oppositions (such as male-female, public-private) that she prepares for her cultivation of a certain will to marginality in the course of its proceedings. Hand in hand with that cultivation goes her resistance to an "all-of-us" or "unity-in-diversity" approach and to attempts "to formulate a coherent notion of explanation and culture" (104). Rather than submit to her colleagues' pressures of inclusion — "They were inviting me into the center at the price of exacting from me the language of centrality" (106) — she addresses the need for the sustained interrogation of processes of socio-cultural reproduction.

Thus, to deal with the "tokenism" of her colleagues at the symposium is but one aspect of what I call her politics of intervention. "... you are as good as we are ... why do you insist on emphasizing your difference?" (107). This, for Spivak, is still part of what she terms "masculist centralism" (107), thrown into relief by her feminist, that is, deliberate, marginality: "The putative center welcomes selective inhabitants of the margin in order better to exclude the margin" (107). But it is precisely because her marginality is deliberate that it enables her to retain access to the "center" as well, i.e., to adopt the strategy of "implicating ... [herself] in that center and sensing what politics make *it* marginal" (107, emphasis mine). In linking "*their* [her colleagues'] masculist practice, mistaken as the neutral and universal practice of intellectuals" (105) with "the practice of capitalism" (107), she draws attention to what she sees as an intricate web of collaboration which makes marginals of *all* "humanists" in an "advanced capitalist technocracy" (107).

This, then, the deconstructive displacement of the distinction between centre and margin allows her to focus on the complex power play in terms of which her humanist colleagues, too, are being tokenized in a society where the academy itself, she argues, is utilized for purposes of ideological reproduction. By emphasizing the importance of feminism beyond the academy in that "rather than being a special interest, [it] might prove a model for the ever-vigilant *integration* of the humanities" (107, emphasis mine), Spivak points to its transformative potential, especially inasmuch as it could serve to illuminate present practices far beyond their arbitrarily existing, possibly "class-protective" (114), boundaries.

As a "feminist, Marxist deconstructivist" (117) she is, obviously, unafraid to break new ground. Her engagement in cultural studies is thus a far cry from any kind of ivory-tower approach. It is, rather, intimately linked with an engagement in the politics of "technological capitalism" (109) and, attendant upon this, "the politics of class, race, and sex" (114). As a university teacher, "working not in the character of the 'universal' ... but in specific sectors ...",[2] it is to be expected, therefore, that her interventionist orientation should

prompt her to want to unsettle yet another opposition (the one between theory and practice) and to attend to "the theory-practice of pedagogic practice-theory that would allow us constructively to question privileged explanations even as explanations are generated" (117).

Language, since Derrida, can never again be thought of as a transparent medium for the communication of reality 'as-it-really-is,' a requirement that was considered to be absolutely essential in the field of philosophy, for example. Consequently, boundaries between disciplines, say, between philosophy and literature, or history, etc., can no longer be taken for granted. Spivak uses this insight strategically in that her texts, as Colin MacCabe puts it in the Foreword, "radically transgress against the disciplines, both the official divisions of anthropology, history, philosophy, literary criticism, sociology and the unofficial divisions between Marxism, feminism, deconstruction" (x). In working against these divisions Spivak points up some of the implications of received, i.e., ideologically inscribed, notions such as aesthetic freedom and "scholarly" detachment and the assumptions and procedures which, at the institutional level, may serve to further an individual's or a discipline's own narrow interests. She considers "not only literature, but the humanities in general [to be] in the service of the state" (99), and it is this, her conviction of the power of the state, that leads her to focus on aspects of human manipulation and control which extend well beyond the more immediate U.S. context out of which she writes.

Speaking/writing not only from the position of an academic, but from that of a "Third World person"[3] (as a "native of India" [99]), Spivak shows that she is no stranger to the workings of imperialist forms of exploitation and control and the ideological underpinnings that promote their perpetuation. In "Reading the World: Literary Studies in the Eighties," she provides a brief outline of America's developing ties with Saudi Arabia in terms of a certain " 'modernizing' package" (99) which includes the latter's import of ready-made "methodologies of the humanities" (99) from the U.S. and the concomitant fabrication of "a 'humanist' intellectual elite that will be unable to read the relationship between its own production and the flow of oil, money, and arms" (100). She continues:

> *A diversified technocratic elite* whose allegiance to humanism, if at all in evidence, will be sentimental, will take care of those dirtier flows. The apparent lack of contact between rational expectations in the business world and *freedom* and *disinterest* in the humanist academy will support each other, as here, and to America's advantage (100, emphasis added).

Freedom (of the aesthetic) is illusory, Spivak suggests, not least of

all because its overt non-interference aspect(s) may serve covert interests of the state. Literature and, by extension, the humanities do not, of course, exist in a vacuum which, for Spivak, necessitates working towards an undoing of "the opposition between the verbal and the social text" (98) or, as she puts it in the introductory paragraph of this essay, filling "the vision of literary form with its connections to what is being read: history, political economy — the world" (95).

In "Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value" Spivak undertakes a careful rereading — which is also a rewriting — of Marx on value, exposing "the discontinuities harbored by the unified terms [of the value chain]" (159), and thus undermining the "continuist urge" (158) of Marx's own analysis (vestiges of which she locates even in studies oriented toward discontinuity, such as Jean-Joseph Goux's *Numismatiques* [156]). She claims that in the work of Marx "intimations of discontinuity are most noticeably covered over in the move from the . . . *Grundrisse* to the finished *Capital I*" (155-56) and concentrates particularly on three moments in the *Grundrisse*, each of which can be shown to point the way to its own deconstruction (Spivak's focus is on terms such as "indifference," "inadequation," "rupture," respectively, terms that suggest "the possibility of an indeterminacy" (159-60). This is in keeping with her argument that, contrary to continuist readings of the labour theory of value in terms of the straightforward representation of value as (objectified) labour, use-value as simultaneously "outside and inside the system of value determinations" (162) renders labour itself indeterminate. Spivak's redefinition of labour reveals it to be, to quote MacCabe, "endlessly variable both in relation to technological change and to political struggles, particularly those around feminism" (xv). One would have to include the relevance of Third World struggles here as well, taking into account Spivak's reminder that, against the backdrop of postindustrialism, any continuist critique of the labour theory of value is likely to "[ignore] the dark presence of the Third World" (167). My review cannot do justice to the scope and complexity of Spivak's arguments in the essays. I wish to stress that they require the effort of the closest possible reading, for only by entering into the difficulties inherent in her radical approaches and her often laborious rewritings of the work of Marx and others is it possible to (re)situate that work, and the work of Spivak herself, within the frames of our own social and cultural contexts.

The essays referred to so far have been from part two ("Into the World") of this three-part collection. One may be forgiven for being puzzled at first by the choice of "Literature" as the heading for part one. But it soon becomes apparent that in Spivak's scheme

this choice too is of strategic importance in that it enables her, amongst other things, to distinguish her own conception of "literature" from that of the American New Criticism with its concern with the unitary nature of literary works and its " 'implicit assumption that literature is an autonomous activity of the mind' " (3).[4] For a telling contrast I jump seventy odd pages ahead to several of Spivak's articulations on the complex space inhabited by literature (under the impact of poststructuralism): 1) "whereas in other kinds of discourses there is a move toward the final truth of a situation, literature . . . displays that the truth of a human situation is the itinerary of not being able to find it" (77); 2) ". . . the discourse of the literary text is part of a general configuration of textuality, a placing forth of the solution as the unavailability of a unified solution to a unified or homogeneous, generating or receiving, consciousness. This unavailability," she adds, "is often not confronted" (78).

Thus it is not that Spivak privileges "literature" as such, but that she sees it as offering a paradigm of the textuality that operates in all discourses, even in those most intent on masking its operations in their quest for "truth." While acknowledging the open-endedness of all forms of signification, she is alert, nonetheless, to the " 'minimal idealizations' which constitute the possibility of reading" (15) and, given that possibility, serve to impose a provisional form of stasis upon the text. "Within a shifting and abyssal frame," she writes, "these idealizations are the 'material' to which we as readers, with our own *elusive historico-politico-economico-sexual determinations*, bring the machinery of our reading and, yes, judgment" (15, emphasis added). Although such determinations suggest anything but a "unified or homogeneous . . . consciousness," they are, for Spivak, an important prerequisite for an enabling critique.

No wonder, then, that she distances herself from those uses of deconstruction which, as she puts it, "fit only too well into the dreary scene of the mainstream pedagogy and criticism of literature in the United States — hedged in . . . by 'the autonomy of the text,' 'the intentional fallacy,' and, indeed, 'the willing suspension of disbelief" (16). It is especially in her second essay, "Finding Feminist Readings: Dante-Yeats," that Spivak takes exception to what she refers to elsewhere as "Deconstruction American Style" (100), a certain kind of institutionally sanctioned (mis)appropriation of Derridean deconstruction which she would, no doubt, agree would fit Terry Eagleton's description of being "as injurious as blank ammunition."[5] The assertion, for example, that "the text deconstructs itself" (15) prompts Spivak to point to the emptiness of a method which, in spite of its adoption of "the vocabulary and presuppositions of deconstruction" (16), serves the purpose, ultimately, to protect the canon, that is, in MacCabe's words, to "reveal the same-

ness and the greatness of the major literary texts" (xii). Written for the most part "out of a feminist anguish with academic deconstructive practice" (26), the essay offers alternative feminist readings of Dante's *La Vita nuova* and Yeats's poem "Ego Dominus Tuus," readings which are sensitive to the sexual ideology informing these texts and thus to their particular treatment of the figure of the woman. In her essay "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman" in *Displacement: Derrida and After,* Spivak states, "I learn from Derrida's critique of phallocentrism — but I must then go somewhere else with it."[6] Derrida himself, I believe, would be the last one to voice an objection, given his frequent reminders that structures of authority and domination have a habit of re-establishing themselves — hence "the necessity of an interminable analysis."[7] Considerations of the sexual ideology that holds hierarchical structures firmly in place are thus very much a part of some of the readings Spivak produces. In these readings too she pays attention to forms of marginality and the repressions and exclusions on which such structures depend. Exigencies of space do not allow for a detailed discussion of the particular strategies which she employs in each of her readings. Suffice it to say that, be it by way of the superimposition of allegory (ies) and autobiography, as in her essay on Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse,* for example, or by way of her focus on the return of the repressed (in terms of sex and politics) in William Wordsworth's *The Prelude (1805)*: Books Nine to Thirteen, Spivak shows that neither "masculine" nor "feminine" inscriptions are ever unproblematical givens but have been — and still are — a product largely of an ideology of male firstness. The readings form an integral part of Spivak's program of working deconstructive interventions upon that ideology, that is, upon traditional (male-ordered) systems of thought and forms of representation.

Spivak's translations of two short stories by the Indian writer Mahasweta Devi provide much of the context for her preoccupations with the problematics of subalternity in the final section, "Entering the Third World." Drawing attention to "patterns of complicity," she acknowledges the complex position of the investigating subject vis-à-vis the object of investigation (179-80). For Spivak there is no value-neutral place from which the critic can speak, no virgin space from which "the First-World scholar in search of the Third World" (179) can apprehend that world. Consequently, she applies the full force of her critical discourse, whether she reads the texts of the "Subaltern Studies" collective or those of Mahasweta Devi. At the same time, however, she explores her own discourse and, more generally, that of the Western critical tradition of which it is a part, in the light of these texts and the "real" towards which they point. The result is an alert and often self-questioning mode of

commentary which resists the homogenizing tendencies of conventional scholarship, especially in terms of particularities such as race, class and gender.

These "Essays in Cultural Politics" were written over a period of time, from the latter half of the 70's to 1987. Their complexity is attributable to Spivak's sophisticated use of poststructuralist approaches and the interventionist stance informing her studies. While they cover a wide range of subjects, they offer a model which effectively combines theory and practice to the extent that the two are shown to be indissolubly interrelated and the subject themselves for continuing analysis. The text is highly recommended to those interested in contemporary critical theory and its application for specific, "political," readings of cultural practice.

NOTES

[1] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984) 44.

[2] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *Michel Foucault: Power, Truth, Strategy*, eds. Megan Morris and Paul Patton (Federal Publications, 1979) 42.

[3] "Questions of Multi-Culturalism: Sneja Gunew and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *Hecate* 12: 1/2 (1986): 136.

[4] Spivak is quoting here from Paul de Man, "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1971) 21.

[5] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory; An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983), 145.

[6] Gayatri C. Spivak, "Displacement and the Discourse of Woman," in *Displacement: Derrida and After*, ed. Mark Krupnick (Bloomington: Indiana UP 1983) 173.

[7] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P 1981) 42.

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