

Death sentences

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A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak *Harvard University Press, 449pp, £15.50 ISBN 0674177649*

In the 1970s "American Pie" became an anthem, the Linear B of pop. Its lyrics refused to yield any coherent meaning. Valedictory, melancholy, celebratory, allusive? Perhaps. "So bye-bye, Miss American Pie,/Drove my Chevy to the levy, but the levy was dry,/And good old boys were drinking whiskey and rye,/Singing this will be the day that I die,/This will be the day that I die." That was the chorus. The verses were even less amenable to interpretation. It sold millions. Asked what it all meant, Don McLean said: "It means I'll never have to work again."

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's title promises that she may be difficult but she'll be definitive. Intriguingly subtitled *Toward a history of the vanishing present*, it promises a state-of-the-art survey of postcolonial reason. Would that it were so. I have attempted to read the book several times and get a strange sensation each time I try. I know that it's written in English - some of the words and the syntax indicate that - but, try as I might, I don't understand most of it, and what I do understand leaves me wondering if what I had gleaned couldn't be said in a simpler way. It's like listening again to "American Pie", gradually realising that the sound is more important than the meaning. Looking at the back cover of the book, which credits Spivak with having written a lot of others, I guess it means she, too, won't have to work again.

The book is not what it says it is. From each section, the ghost of a meaning emerges. This study of postcolonial reason is very much a critique of the reasoning of the colonisers themselves. But it's stretching several points to include Freud and Kant among these, since they had very little to do with colonial or postcolonial "discourse", having expressed no opinions on the subject that Spivak can put through the tortuous wringer of her prose.

There ought to be a definitive study of postcolonial reason. I can't think of a book that historically or critically locates and distinguishes between the philosophers, writers, historians and artists of countries that have emerged from colonial rule. The eulogies and prizes for the communicative Calibans have not inspired any concerted attempt to understand and "place" them within their world, within the globalised western traditions in which they work. Such a study would look, for a start, at the "texts" of, say, Naipaul, Walcott, Soyinka, perhaps Rushdie, Seth - inheritors of the colonial tradition and yet aliens within it. Spivak makes no reference to any of these writers. So what have we got instead? *Hamlet* without the prince, his mother and all the courtiers? Or a book on English soccer that doesn't mention United or Arsenal and rambles on about Hegel's definition of a "goal"?

Expectations aside, let Spivak herself tell us what her book is about: "My aim to begin with, was to track the figure of the Native Informant through various practices: philosophy, literature, history, culture. I found that the tracking showed up a colonial subject detaching itself from the Native Informant. After 1989, I began to sense that a certain postcolonial subject had, in turn, been recoding the colonial subject and appropriating the Native Informant's position."

I took this to mean that whites used to write about the people they colonised but nowadays a lot of the ex-colonials are writing about the whites who wrote about them. But perhaps that's not what she means at all. And it gets worse.

Throughout, evasion of the obvious and the invention of spurious and fanciful constructs, disguised in recondite argot, transforms itself from a manner to the sole matter. Somewhere the faint deposit of a radical pretension is discernible. It is even possible that Spivak, in some obscure sense, considers herself a champion of the voiceless. But these voiceless can't be the feminists and the workers. Too many voices have been raised in their cause, and she has a quarrel with feminists and radicals alike. Her chosen people are the Aborigines of Australasia and the Adivasis of India, the strategy of whose culture is harmonisation with ecology. But the opaque language and argument of even these sections prevents anyone engaged in the politics of these populations and classes from gaining any insight. They are written for the same audience that absorbs/doesn't absorb (to adopt one of her mannerisms) the rest of the gobbledegook: namely her unfortunate editors.

This being so, the most surprising passages are the occasional descent into pure Rajneesh: "We all know that when we engage profoundly with one person, the responses - the answers - come from both sides. Let us call this responsibility, as well as 'answer' ability or accountability. We also know, and if we don't we have been unfortunate, that in such engagements we want to reveal and reveal, conceal nothing. Yet on both sides, there is always a sense that something has not got across."

She can say that again.