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## MODERATION, THE POST-COLONIAL, AND THE RADICAL VOICE

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*HJEAS*

Post-colonial theory, like other theoretical impulses derived from and proclaiming a connection to political radicalism, faces an inevitable crisis in establishing itself, since in doing so it risks becoming part of the establishment. Post-colonial theory and criticism are involved in a crisis of institutionality in which they must confront the paradoxes inherent in their place in academia. The homogenising and canonical effects which taught curricula have had on post-colonialism can be illustrated by reference to the ways in which the theoretical and textual contours of post-colonialism are constituted in teaching anthologies: through the demands of the everydayness of academic institutions, and the processes by which changes in the study of literature find their way in to culture more generally, post-colonial theory has had the effect of “popularising” sets of writers and ways of reading which are at one level the “goal” of the post-colonial and yet risk being an end-point and resolution for its impetus.

This essay argues that while these strands play a central role in giving post-colonial theory a credence and substance (which has allowed it to become so accepted and influential), they also follow certain patterns and reinforce particular assumptions about the aims, bases, and politics of what the post-colonial is. Now that post-colonialism is recognised and established inside and outside the academy, it may be worthwhile seeing this in itself as a kind of crisis. I shall begin with an examination of the trope represented in post-colonial studies by Gayatri Spivak’s well-rehearsed question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, examining how the tension between the academic voice and “the people” it seeks to represent is made central to Roland Barthes’s book *Michelet*. Barthes’s version of Michelet is instructive, I argue, because of its recognition of the actual as well as theoretical role played by the intellectual as individual in radical, identitarian criticism (in Michelet’s case his French nationalism). The paper concludes by turning to Antonio Gramsci and his writing on “The

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Moderates and the Intellectuals,” which perhaps further illuminates the dilemma which Barthes’s *Michelet* begins to expose—how the “radical” critical voice seems to be impossibly anticipated by that which it pits itself against. Gramsci and Barthes together, partly through their own implication in the forms of Western academic “theory” which have prompted and supported the post-colonial, question the possible sense of achievement which post-colonial criticism might feel, while equally being sceptical of a self-perpetuating sense of crisis.

### Barthes’s *Michelet*

*The colonized considers those venerable scholars relics and thinks of them as sleepwalkers who are living in an old dream. (Memmi 172)*

*[. . .] he says that in the course of his labours it would happen that inspiration failed him: he then would go downstairs and out of his house, and enter a public urinal whose odor was suffocating. He breathed deeply, and having thus “approached as close as he could to the object of his horror,” he returned to his work. I cannot help recalling the author’s countenance, noble, emaciated, the nostrils quivering. (Bataille on Michelet)<sup>1</sup>*

The role of the intellectual voice in the construction of radical identities has been central to post-colonial criticism. Memmi’s amusedly affectionate dismissal of “venerable scholars” sleepwalking their way through a colonial history that is constantly passing them by is an appealing way to circumvent the interminable question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” which shadows, *in potentia*, all pronouncements on the post-colonial subject. Spivak’s question and its possible declensions essentially deny that an academic voice can be elevated to a point of enlightenment above the shadows of history, and, since Spivak’s essay, post-colonial theory has had a shorthand way in which to express its awareness of the potentially crippling vacuity which haunts its inherited rhetoric of activism. Yet post-colonial criticism *has* gone on despite itself, and continues to find ways of speaking “of” its subject. Memmi’s

analysis and Spivak's question pressurise intellectually radical discourse which avows to be from "below," in two distinct ways. For Memmi, the conditions of colonialism and the post-colonial outstrip the capacities of the scholarly, so that the possibility of finding an adequate conceptual and historical framework for the (post-)colonial is always archaized and shut off by the place in which that framework must be articulated. For Spivak, the critical voice (or any voice which speaks "about" the colonised) immediately suffers the distancing institutionality which fractures the "object" of discourse from the voice which speaks it and which it attempts to make its own, simultaneous "subject."

In remembering the anecdote about Michelet, Bataille brings together these two problems in one "embodied" moment. Bataille thus also ennobles the pathos of Michelet's solution—Michelet, constantly "feeling" history as personal physiological trauma, tries to break through to "the people," his object of study, by forcing himself through another physiological trauma which brings him face to face with the evidence of "their" literal body politic. The quivering of Michelet's nostrils may be comically deflating, in the first instance (like Memmi's intellectuals, Michelet could be missing the substance of history, experiencing the nightmare of loss while dreaming delusions of grandeur), but his descent downstairs, his leaving of the sanctity of his own house and place of writing, and his self-degradation in primal excreta, function as a parable of the "scholarly" when it lives off "the people" as the basis of its existence. Michelet is alone, silent, inadequate, but ultimately valiant because he confronts and knows the abyss at the centre of his project. Above all, Michelet (in having this story known as well as enacting it) forces his writing about "the people" to a crisis which involves the elemental nature of his self-identity. In doing this, Michelet certainly anticipates the gap between colonised people and post-colonial critique which has recently resurfaced; more profoundly, he moves to the edge of that aporia, needing the object of his study to be the most sensate of realities, and insisting that it disturb his own calm. If Michelet cannot be *of* the people (and, as Barthes shows, he knew that he always failed to be), his sense of their corporeality as refracted through his own is as appropriately "noble" and "emaciated" as the crisis which he lives out.

In his book *Michelet*, Roland Barthes allows Michelet to incant the indulgences of “venerable scholars” who utter “the people.” Barthes’s Michelet can usefully initiate a discussion of the strategies of writing about the post-colonial in relation to the critical “self” which becomes implicated in that act. In what follows, I shall attempt to examine the role which the “warmer memory” of “the people” crucially undertakes in the processes of a criticism which takes to itself or asserts identity politics within the discourses and institutional structures which validate the academic.

### **The Need for Warmth**

Michelet’s view of history intrigues Barthes for many reasons (its critical sense of the bodily is only one example<sup>2</sup>). But above all, it offers Barthes, pre-*Mythologies*, a challenge which Michelet also sets himself when he suggests that in history-writing “words must be heard which were never spoken” (qtd. in Barthes 102). In one way this is the purest of structuralist challenges; Barthes’s Michelet is engaged in writing a history of France through a self-consciously doubled order of signs, in which historical events as signifiers act as a sign system in themselves, revealing history as other historians write and read it, but also point to a mythological second order of signs which delineates the words of an embedded and “impossible language.” Michelet, as quoted by Barthes, writes: “I was born of the people, I have the people in my heart. The monuments of its olden days have been my delight [. . .] But the people’s language, its language was inaccessible to me. I have not been able to make the people speak” (Barthes 199).

Michelet’s failure as a historian hinges on his acceptance of what Spivak, through Said, constantly reminds us of in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”: “the critic’s institutional responsibility” (Spivak 75).<sup>3</sup> And Michelet takes this “responsibility” not in its meanest sense (that is, in being responsible to itself, to history, to objectivity, to disciplinary rigours), but in its weightiest connotation as a self-inflicted and continual need to remember and pay dues to the predicatory foundation for the critical voice. Michelet’s voice here is close to the “baleful innocence”<sup>4</sup>

which Spivak identifies when, in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” she analyses Deleuze’s conversation with Foucault. In the end, however, Michelet’s balefulness, in its raw self-aware state, is entirely opposite to theirs. Contrast Michelet’s abnegation in the urinal to Spivak’s comment on Deleuze and Foucault: “The banality of leftist intellectuals’ lists of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns stands revealed; representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent” (Spivak 70).

Michelet, painfully, cannot believe himself transparent and yet cannot break out of the connective fabric of “representation” which interweaves “the choice of and need for ‘heroes’” with re-presentation in the “scene of writing.”<sup>5</sup> Writing itself thus becomes for Michelet a bodily enterprise, just as the evidence of the history he lives off takes on a repulsive-attractive corporeal form; history for Michelet, as Barthes suggests, is to be “consummated” and “consumed” (Barthes 25). And yet Michelet’s history, bound by the strictures of representation, is riven by the movement to the material and bodily, set against a realisation of the “impossible language” needed to conceive history. Both the textuality and the mystically unsayable nature of this dilemma are incarcerated in Barthes’s summary of Michelet’s idea of the “historian’s duties”: “The historian is in fact a civil magistrate in charge of administering the estate of the dead” (Barthes 82). As civil *servant* (of the people), as “the magus who receives from the dead their actions” (Barthes 82), and who is duty-bound to voice words “never spoken,” Michelet’s own corporeality and selfhood are continually questioned in this self-exiled existence between the paradoxically substantial ghosts which are “the people” and the spectral realities which are historical facts.

The importance of Michelet’s example lies in his ability (and in that of Barthes’s prompting critique) to make “the people” the site and receptor of his energies while knowing their unbridgeable distance from himself. Michelet, through Barthes, turns on their heads the transparency of the subaltern and the self-knowing of the intellectual, so that “the people,” source of his very existence, are at best for him an “it,” and so veering towards being an Other, while the self “Michelet” which writes is made strange and decayed to itself. Moving towards the people and towards himself, Michelet vainly but heroically empties the heroism of history, questions his own heroism, and keeps “the people” from the text.

Michelet's example is no solution to the question of how the act of representing "the people" can be made transparent; what he stands as, through Barthes, is a statement of the nature of the difficulties which Spivak sees post-colonial and post-structuralist radicalism constantly evading.

Michelet frankly acknowledges the attraction of "warmth" over "light"; light being a "critical idea [which] implies culture and brightness," while warmth is "a phenomenon of depth; it is the sign of the mass, of the innumerable, of the people, of the barbarian" (184). And so it is that the "voice of the people affords Michelet a 'warmer' memory that is more 'linked together' than all the writings of the legislators and witnesses" (82). The bifurcation of "light" and "warmth" as poles of repulsion and attraction undoes that banality which Spivak bemoans and puts in process a deconstruction of "the people" as intellectual piety.<sup>6</sup> "Light" and "warmth" are definitively not opposites for Michelet; their phenomenological interrelation and inter-reliance, and yet their inherent difference, give them a co-existence which conceptually is able to symbolise the tortured kind of self-sustenance which the intellectual voice finds itself reluctant, unable and unwilling to achieve. The "warmth" of "the people" (who for Michelet linger on in that racialised binarity of barbarian/civilised) proves irresistible for post-colonial criticism, but may need to be forever unobtainable.

"The people," as Michelet always fails to find them, are thus fetishised to some extent, and would be fully, if only he could find "it," and so make "it" into "them." "The people" as "it" plays hide and seek with Michelet so that he can never say for certain whether "it" is now or will be soon a "they." All he has is the unrecapturable certainty of the past tense ("I was born of the people") and so he senses and remembers the "warmth" of the people, but never regains "its" heat in his writing. The impossible language of the subaltern people will always attract him, by choice and by necessity; more than this, "it" (as entity and as language) demands the absolute attention of his writing and in the end his whole self as intellectual. So Michelet's journey out of his house is the closest that he can come to the double representation which he desires. That journey makes foundational and yet absent "the people" and the form of language they demand but which cannot be attained.

Post-colonial critical voices, I would argue, find themselves in varieties of Michelet's structural predicament, and yet endanger their radicalism without the state of crisis which continually undoes hidden forms of containment.

### **"The Moderates and the Intellectuals"**

Michelet's dilemma is usefully paralleled, and to some extent overcome, in the thought of Antonio Gramsci. In Gramsci's writings the role of the intellectual voice is made central to the articulation of the "radical" in a society which is ready to absorb that radicalism into itself. And in this we can use Gramsci to see how that crucial line between speaking "of" and speaking "for" will trouble post-colonial criticism much as it troubles Michelet. Gramsci's theory of subaltern affiliation has a now distinguished role in post-colonial criticism, and in its own way it rehearses the arguments and futurological changes which are the point of desire which Michelet is focussed on. While the term "subaltern" has a post-colonial currency in the work of the Subaltern Studies group in India, and most especially for cultural theorists in Spivak's critique of Subaltern Studies, a return to Gramsci's original formulation of the notion of the subaltern (as he had applied it to Italian history) allows for an understanding of the relationship between narratives of oppression and liberation, which elides the placing of the subaltern in what is necessarily always an unsuccessful revolution. In much post-colonial theory subalternity, decried as a politically unjust status by those who speak about/against it, functions as an invocation of an unspoilt consciousness, pure because disempowered. As Spivak suggests, this intellectual ethics of oppression can concretise "a nostalgia for lost origins [which] can be detrimental to the exploration of social realities within the critique of imperialism" (87). The subaltern is thus potentially always "marginal," and its marginality and exclusion (like the intellectual positions from which it is spoken) becomes its own explanation and justification.

The advantage of Gramsci's formulation of the subaltern resides in its possibility of change and affiliation *within* subaltern classes and *across* hegemony/subalternity. For Gramsci the subaltern is not made



eternally static by its position. In its “active or passive affiliation” to dominant formations, Gramsci’s subalterns attempt to “influence the programmes of these formations [and to] press claims of their own” (Gramsci 52). Attaching itself to non-subaltern groups (in a sense imitating or becoming part of their practice), the subaltern aspires to hegemony *in the same way as* the groups which currently constitute that hegemony. While this may be a less than palatable view for the radical intellectual desiring to speak of and for the oppressed, it offers the cultural critic a potentially dynamic model through which the cultural changes of colonialism/post-colonialism or anti-colonial nationalism/statehood can be conceptualised. Further, it allows for competition/co-operation between subaltern groups to be understood as contingent, subversive, and affiliative simultaneously.

Gramsci’s subaltern is, above all, not “outside” history. Instead, in their desire for “affiliation,” the subaltern “people” are made part of that system which simultaneously excludes them—analogously, post-colonial criticism can be seen to be constituted at once by its position inside and outside the critical orthodoxy and, like Gramsci’s subaltern, by its ability to maintain the paradox through the pivotal role of the articulating intellectual.<sup>7</sup>

While Spivak and, more widely, the Subaltern Studies project have exemplified and problematised the meeting point of the politically radical with the critical voice which valorises it, the Gramscian origins of the term “subaltern” are at times lost and obscured by the concerns of those who have deployed it; my own suggestion would be that Gramsci himself shows an awareness of the *implicated* practice of radicalism at the crucial juncture of critical text with radical action, and that where he does so, the hints he gives may illuminate the crisis of institutionality which post-colonial theory may now be said to face (a crisis which ironically includes the institutionality of the very term “subaltern”). In his section of the *Prison Notebooks* called “The Moderates and the Intellectuals,” Gramsci, looking back on nineteenth-century Italian history, wonders “[why] the Moderates were bound to gain the upper hand as far as the majority of intellectuals were concerned” (102). Gramsci’s speculative answers fascinatingly hinge not so much on the ideologically abstract, nor on showing the political weakness of the intellectual class (he does

not, that is, assume exactly the same, *linguistically driven*, dilemma of articulation which dogs Michelet). Instead, Gramsci's way of "grasping the mechanism of the Moderates' hegemony" relies on a recognition of the role of "Scholastic activity" (103); so "a scholastic programme," which is above all pedagogically interested, entices the Intellectuals into affiliation with the Moderates. This is entwined with an economy of intellectual activity, including the "study of encyclopaedic and specialised reviews" (104). The parallels with the way in which post-colonial theory has quickly become integrated into literary studies both pedagogically and as a "specialism" need hardly be laboured, and the content of the teaching anthologies which have appeared on the subject might be re-examined in this light, in that their accessibility to both student and teacher may allow for a "radicalism" to be transferred to the classroom in an altered state, in which alterity is rendered safer.

Underlying this "mechanical" and practical process, for Gramsci, is another characterising explanation of how the Intellectual merges into the Moderate—Gramsci suggests that affiliation to the Moderate position "offers to its adherents an intellectual 'dignity' providing a principle of differentiation from the old ideologies which dominated by coercion, and an element of struggle against them" (104). We are thrown back here, at a fundamental level, to the need for "warmth" which Michelet finds so traumatically elusive: for Gramsci, the "dignity" of being seen to be against coercion, to be in the act of struggle, is potentially the source of a kind of false consciousness which is drawn to an object of ideological desire emptied of its radical potential by "Moderation." Gramsci's writings therefore posit a dilemma which is more politicised and, in that sense, more ideologically complex than Michelet's; Gramsci's identification moves Michelet's troubled relation to "the people" to the edge of its desire for "warmth" and "dignity," and threatens to uncover the "element of struggle" as the intoxication which precedes the inoculation of the intellectually radical. For post-colonial theory, Gramsci's point is most succinctly made when he discusses Marx's theory of "passive revolution" and writes that "a society does not set itself tasks for whose solution the necessary conditions have not already been incubated" (106).<sup>8</sup>

It is, of course, not necessarily the case that post-colonial theory has been deracinated of its “newness” from the beginning, nor that either the sub-discipline or its supporting anthologies are entirely accounted for by the “Moderation” which the academy tends towards. But the sense of exhaustion and anxiety is indicative of both the problem which bedevils post-colonial theory, and perhaps its solution. If post-colonial theory arrived when the academy was ready to receive it, then the conditions of its formulation, reception, and impact may well have been anticipated, “incubated,” and contained beforehand. If so, post-colonial theory needs to be continually vigilant in assessing how its energies have been organised and dissipated, and to do so it may find a use in reintroducing *as dilemma* the dilemma which Michelet exemplifies, knowing before its start that the alterity which it seeks to give voice to will be uttered within a disciplinary context whose “affiliation” is double-edged. Against the unproductive and empty “dignity” of Gramsci’s scholars we can set the abject lack of dignity which Michelet experiences and begin to wonder which form of intellectual engagement with history allows for a post-colonial future which has room for a newness beyond the tasks already expected of it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bataille, “Preface to *La sorcière*”, qtd. in Barthes, *Michelet* 221.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Moriarty notes that the “phenomenological stress on the lived experience of a physical individual in contact with the material world is central to Barthes’s [. . .] *Michelet* of 1954” (187).

<sup>3</sup> For Said’s discussion of intellectual responsibility see his *The World, the Text and the Critic*.

<sup>4</sup> Discussing Deleuze’s “genuflection” to “the worker’s struggle,” Spivak writes: “The invocation of *the worker’s struggle* is baleful in its very innocence” (67).

<sup>5</sup> See Spivak’s discussion of *Vertretung* and *Darstellung* in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (74 and *passim*).

<sup>6</sup> Spivak writes: “The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with ‘woman’ as a pious item” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 104).

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent discussion of some of the ramifications of this paradox, see the “Derrida in Algeria” section of Robert J. C. Young’s *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, 411-26.

<sup>8</sup> Gramsci is here quoting from memory Marx's Preface to *The Critique of Political Economy*. See notes to p. 106 of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* for full details.

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