

Jacques Rancière and the Subversion of Mastery¹

Rancière's most basic assumption is very simple: everyone thinks, everyone speaks. Like many of his philosophical contemporaries, Rancière further assumes that thought or discourse always proceeds at odds with itself, through forms of creative disjunction or ambivalence which resist any mechanism designed to pin them down or straighten them out. Thinking evades regulation and contests classification. To think is itself to subvert any rigid distribution of classes, places and norms.

Everyone thinks, but the prevailing division of labour and configuration of society ensures that only certain classes of people are *authorized* to think. Rancière's most general concern, therefore, is to analyse and dismantle the various obstacles that confront the general exercise of thought or speech. He studies the mechanisms that parcel out the domain of experience in the widest sense of the word, the domain of what can be thought, sensed, felt, and so on (*le partage du sensible*). One way or another, such mechanisms or conventions serve to divide legitimate from illegitimate aspects of this domain — they serve to distinguish, for example, valid forms of speech from mere heresy, authorized forms of thought from mere delusion or distraction, genuine art from mere non-art, and so on.

In most of his otherwise varied projects, Rancière seeks to expose the artifice and subvert the authority of these mechanisms — in particular, the norms of distinction and representation that might allow for the stable differentiation of one *class* of person or experience from another (workers from intellectuals, masters from followers, the articulate from the inarticulate, the artistic from the non-artistic). Rancière's work is thus always actively egalitarian, in keeping with his assumption that 'the essence of equality is not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with controversial figures of division. Equality is the power of inconsistent, disintegrative and ever-replayed division' (*SP*, 32–3) which subverts every figure of collective harmony or stability. As a general principle, Rancière believes that 'it is in the moments when the real world wavers and seems to reel into mere appearance, more than in the slow accumulation of day-to-day experiences, that it becomes

possible to form a judgement about the world' (NL, 19). In so far as it explores what becomes possible (to think, to say, to see...) in such moments, Rancière's work might be described as a sort of relentless questioning or experimentation that proceeds in line with what Schiller identifies, at the very moment in which he rejects all norms of representation, as the 'fundamental law of the aesthetic state: to grant freedom by means of freedom'.²

What is most consistent in Rancière's work, in other words, is first the affirmation of a sort of fundamental inconsistency or 'unclassifiability', an essential instability of experience, and second, the steadfast subversion of any form of authority or mastery that might seek to return modes of experience to their conventionally sanctioned place. The extent to which this agenda was shaped by his break with Althusser and his early experience of teaching at the University of Paris VIII (Saint-Denis) is relatively well known. In what follows, I will focus instead on the way Rancière has pursued its implications in several related fields, before turning to a couple of problems raised by his critique of mastery, in particular by his evasion of questions relating to the sorts of mastery at issue in formal or technical virtuosity and in political prescription and organisation. Rancière has applied the work of de-normalization or de-classification on a number of distinct though over-lapping fronts, which for the sake of analysis might be distinguished as pedagogical, philosophical, historiographical, political, sociological, and aesthetic.

I

Perhaps the most immediately striking case, and the one most obviously implicated in Rancière's own vocation, is the case of education itself. Conventional teaching, of course, divides the knowledgeable from the unknowledgeable, teachers from students, strong students from weaker students, and so on. As Althusser once put it: 'the function of teaching is to transmit a determinate knowledge to subjects who do not possess this knowledge. The teaching situation thus rests on the absolute condition of an inequality between a knowledge and a nonknowledge'.³ The whole effort of one of Rancière's most remarkable books, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), is to refuse this inequality and all its implications. He rejects any attempt to conceive of education in terms of differences of knowledge or authority, just as he refuses any direct connection between education and the generalized classification or 'placement' of children. Inspired by the maverick

example of Joseph Jacotot (1770–1840), Rancière's guiding pedagogical principle is that 'all men [are] virtually capable of understanding what others had done and understood' (*IS*, 2). From the beginning, *everyone* has the same intelligence; what varies is only the opportunity and the determination to exercise it.

On the basis of this supposition, superior knowledge ceases to be a necessary qualification of the teacher. Jacotot discovered that students were perfectly capable of teaching themselves languages that he himself didn't speak or was unable to *explain*; he learned that it is possible to teach something you know little or nothing about, insofar as you manage to provoke or inspire students to acquire the knowledge they desire. To teach is not primarily to impart or explain what you know to those who do not yet know it. On the contrary, explanation (along with the attendant metaphors that distinguish children as slow or quick, 'behind' or 'advanced', that conceive of educational time in terms of selection, progress, training and qualification) is itself the fundamental 'myth of pedagogy' (*IS*, 6–7). A teacher's chief responsibility is not to explain things but to confront students with the sufficient power of their own intelligence. All learning takes place, Jacotot assumes, on the model of primary language-learning — through experimentation, searching, exploration, guess-work, repetition. Only this kind of learning is consistent with the presumption of actual equality. So long as teaching conforms to the logic of explanation it can only adopt equality as a distant goal, one that in practice will never be reached: few students will ever 'progress' to a sufficiently 'advanced' position in the accumulation of knowledge. By the same token, the only way ever to affirm a meaningful equality is to posit it in advance, as a sort of axiom. 'Equality was not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a *supposition* to maintain in every circumstance', for 'the same intelligence is at work in all the productions of the human mind' (*IS*, 138, 18).⁴

Rancière's general argument with philosophy, most substantially stated in *The Philosopher and his Poor* (1983), concerns its inaugural attempt to deny this sameness. According to Rancière, philosophy *per se* begins by trying to distinguish people capable of genuine thought from others who, entirely defined by their social or economic occupation, are presumed to lack the ability, time and leisure required for thought. Labour is assumed literally to *exhaust* the labourer. The paradigm here is Plato's division of society into functional orders (artisans, warriors, rulers), such that slaves, or shoemakers, for instance, are forever banished from the domain of philosophy. To each type

of person, one allotted task: labour, war, or thought. The Platonic conception of justice then turns on the application of the virtues appropriate to each class—the wisdom of the philosophers and the courage of the warriors is matched by the moderation of the artisans, where moderation is nothing other than resignation to place (*PP*, 47). In particular, defined by what he makes or does, the artisan is firmly excluded from those domains of ‘play, deception, appearance’ that Plato identifies as the exclusive preserve of nobility (36, 84). And the first concern of nobility, along with the enjoyment of appearances (and the effort to ‘keep up appearances’) is to prevent those who, by seeking to imitate a type other than their own, might threaten to cross these fundamental functional lines.

According to Rancière, the underlying logic of philosophical exclusion endures even when thinkers like Marx and Sartre adopt universal emancipation as their explicit goal. Vanguard political theory works within the pedagogical or ‘explanatory’ paradigm as a matter of course. Those who have nothing to lose but their chains will only lose them in ways illuminated by their philosophical masters; the masses may well make their own history but, absorbed in their making, they aren’t *aware* that they make it (*PP*, 195).⁵ Marx’s philosophy, Rancière says, is an attempt to isolate the theory-certified category of the proletariat from actual workers, i.e. from workers who drew some inspiration from ‘petit-bourgeois’ notions of solidarity, fraternity, communal property, and so on—precisely those workers, in other words, who *already* behaved as communists (128). Since it is not the actual process of work but instead the ‘disappropriation of work which forms the proletariat’, so then this latter category, purified of the ambivalent affinities of working class consciousness, comes into being as ‘nothing other than the negation of the worker’ (121–2).

Like Marx before him, Sartre is only comfortable with pure, philosophically sanctioned forms of radical negation and antagonism (*PP*, 233–4). Sartre understands that free consciousness, or thought, always proceeds at odds with itself, as other than itself, as non-identical with itself—these are precisely the characteristic qualities of consciousness as ‘for-itself’. Insofar as a person *labours*, however, they are defined by the supposedly stable identity of their work, i.e. they are effectively incapable of thought. From the beginning (and most obviously in his novel *Nausea*), Sartre denies the figure of the ‘autodidact’ any genuine power of thought, just as he conceives of identification with any social role or occupation (however ambivalent such identification might be) as a retreat into thoughtless denial or

'bad faith' (*PP*, 214, 229). Even in the more 'socialized' pages of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Rancière argues that it remains 'inconceivable that working bodies might by themselves ever win the slightest degree of liberty'. Critical awareness remains a function of the literally 'elevated' perspective of philosophy, a perspective conditioned by its leisured distance from manual work (*PP*, 210–12). Absorbed in the serial monotony of their task, workers on their own are incapable of grasping the 'totality' that conditions their praxis, and in the absence of an external threat or Terror they cannot constitute themselves as an active political subject (218). At best, workers figure here as those social objects endowed with the potential to become subjects, provided that they encounter the appropriate philosophical catalyst.

As you might expect, of all the human sciences it is sociology that is most guilty of propounding a reductive conception of occupation and class. Rancière's most substantial book, *The Nights of Labor* (1981), is an exercise in anti-sociology which rejects neo-Marxist attempts to purify the complexity of workers' experience along with any nostalgic attempt to preserve a 'traditional' working class identity. A record and analysis of working class intellectual life in the 1830s and 40s, it undercuts any effort 'to preserve popular, plebeian or proletarian purity'. In the absence left by the disappearance of the 'authentic' working class, Rancière clears a space for the emergence of unauthorized combinations and inventions — transposed utopias, reappropriations of literary forms, worker-run newspapers and nocturnal poetry societies, trans-occupational associations. The purpose of this and related research, Rancière says, was not to uncover the truth about 'real' workers from under various false representations so much as to open the way for something new: to displace 'objectively' constituted figures 'so that other figures may come together and decompose there' (*NL*, x, 10). The workers whose words are recorded by Rancière complain less about material hardship and more about the predetermined quality of lives framed by rigid social hierarchy. 'Perhaps the truly dangerous classes', he concludes, 'were not so much the uncivilized ones thought to undermine society from below but rather the migrants who move at the borders between classes — individuals and groups who develop capabilities of no direct use for the improvement of their material lives, and which might in fact make them despise material concerns.'⁶

No less than the anguished phenomenologist wrestling with the non-identity of consciousness, these workers think and speak in terms that exceed any coincidence with themselves, with their occupational place. They *think*, in short, rather than simply behave as representatives

of a category or class. But by the same token, they think *as workers*, from within their particular confrontation with the prevailing organization of classes and functions, and always at the risk of new forms of prescriptive identification. (It is the peculiar delusion of conventional philosophy, Rancière suggests, to presume that thought proceeds not only as a form of dis-placement but as *fully* independent of place.) Hence the double movement that Rancière sought to illuminate in *The Nights of Labor*:

The proletarians of the 1830s were people seeking to constitute themselves as speaking beings, as thinking beings in their own right. But this effort to break down the barrier between those who think and those who don't came to constitute a sort of shared symbolic system, a system forever threatened by new positivation (...). These forms of subjectivation or disidentification were always at risk of falling into an identitarian positivation, whether that was a corporative conception of class or the glorious body of a community of producers. (PA, 196-7)

To think is here to refuse, from a specific place, a prescribed or classified place at the risk of prescribing a new kind of place: the movement to and from this risk is irreducible. Rather than try to isolate a pure or autonomous subject position once and for all, Rancière's priority is 'to show how the figure of subjectivation itself is constantly unstable, constantly caught between the work of symbolic disincorporation and the constitution of new bodies' (PA, 197). Active thought proceeds between two extremes, between the thoughtless confinement to place and a merely utopian abstraction from place.

In *The Philosopher and His Poor*, Rancière notes that this essential instability of thought is denied even by so militant and progressive a sociologist as Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu and Rancière share a suspicion of what the former calls the 'scholastic disposition', the way scholars in general and philosophers in particular assume (and then naturalize) a distance from the practical concerns of the world, of material scarcity, physical labour and social interaction. Both are concerned with the forms of symbolic violence that sustain the differentiation of social classes. But if Bourdieu's work on the French education system, for instance, clearly demonstrates how it is skewed to favour those whose privileged or leisured way of life disposes them to take an interest in 'impractical' practices like intellectual abstraction or aesthetic distance, Rancière argues that the sociologist's approach also preserves the gap between elite insight and popular ignorance. Bourdieu's critique operates on the assumption

that the school system excludes poorer or 'less cultivated' people in ways these people are themselves not equipped to understand, i.e. by telling them in effect that they are not 'gifted' for study, that they lack a proper 'taste' for reflection or art.⁷ Rather than challenge this alleged lack of understanding, Bourdieu effectively reinforces it when, in his critique of cultural hierarchies he continues to distinguish between the fundamental detachment or impracticality of the privileged—those descendants of Plato's nobility who revel in the refinements of form, of 'art for art's sake'—from the earthy vulgarity of the masses who supposedly prefer function over form and matter over manner (a hearty meal rather than *nouvelle cuisine*, 'good value' over fashionable design). Bourdieu's critique preserves the familiar distribution of roles: challenging or experimental art is the privilege of the leisured few, while the 'people' prefer familiarity and convention. In this sense, 'popular aesthetics is simply the absence of "aesthetics"', insofar as all aesthetic perception proceeds at a distance from exclusively practical concerns (*PP*, 271). Bourdieu downplays any evidence that the 'people' are capable of appreciating art or the play of appearances and imitation, and so on (266–9). His critique of philosophical privilege, Rancière concludes, in fact preserves its most ancient prejudice, its assumption that people who work have no time to think.

When Rancière turns to the writing of history, it is again in order to expose the way historians from Michelet to Braudel have presented a picture of the world in which each individual is set in their appropriate place, in which any particular voice becomes audible insofar as its articulates the logic or 'mentality' associated with that place. In Michelet's histories, 'everything has a meaning to the degree that every speech production is assignable to the legitimate expression of a place: the earth that shapes men, the sea on which their exchanges take place, the everyday objects in which their relations can be read . . .' (*NH*, 65). Michelet and his successors certainly widen the horizons of a discipline traditionally limited to the concerns of government and the elite, but they allow the masses to occupy the historical stage only insofar as they stick to the historian's script. Michelet's work provides for the 'entrance of the people from anonymity into the universe of speakers', but this is because he simultaneously 'invents the art of making the poor speak by keeping them silent, of making them speak as silent people' (*NH*, 44–5). When the people speak it is to confess their ignorance, their lack of a voice of their own, their need of an Oedipus who might solve their riddles and tell them 'the meaning of

their words, their acts, which they themselves didn't understand'. For Michelet as for Marx, 'the people themselves know nothing of the meaning that makes them speak, that speaks in them'.⁸ The historian who deciphers such speech *puts it to rest*, he restores it to the tomb in which dead speech belongs.

Braudel repeats Michelet's gesture when, confronted by the new loquacity of 'the poor, the humble, eager to write, to talk of themselves and of others', he finds a way of thinking of historical time at a distance from the 'way it was felt, described and lived by contemporaries whose lives were as short and as short-sighted as ours', whose words and writings 'assume a false importance' in the misleading intensity of the present.⁹ The *Annales* project inaugurated by Braudel is precisely an effort to find a place for time, to allow a (geographical, social, political) time to be contemporary with itself: everything proceeds at its own rhythm, on its own time, in its own place. Whereas for Rancière it is axiomatic that thought never coincides with itself, that the specifically human being is a being that can never be contemporary with itself, it is this determination to situate speech in time, to allow words to 'coincide with themselves', that distinguishes a specifically historical account from other applications of social science to material from the past.

What is banished from this territorializing conception of history is the very possibility of heresy, i.e. heresy understood as the 'disturbance of the speaker' and disruption of the community. Heresy is what fails to fit within the geo-cultural landscape of a *mentalité*. Heresy 'gives life to erratic speech' (*NH*, 88). It is no accident that one of the most celebrated books of the *Annales* school, Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1975) — a study enabled by the inquisition's investigation of Cathar heresy in the fourteenth century — the historian's 'object is not heresy but the village that gives it a place'. The result effectively repeats the inquisitorial gesture: 'the historian suppresses heresy by giving it roots' (*NH*, 73). Nor is it an accident that history as conceived by Braudel and his colleagues tends to privilege the relatively distant past, since as Rancière insists, 'the distinctive feature of the modern democratic age consists in ruining the very ground on which the voices of history let themselves be territorialized'. The modern working class emerges precisely as a class sustained by a network of contingent and fragile connections linking conditions of exploitation and work with 'extravagant paths of heretical knowledge' (revolutionary principles, the legacy of artisanal organizations, borrowings from Saint-Simon and his followers, theories of self-education, heterodox medical or

astronomical knowledges, and so on). The democratic project which evolves together with this class likewise involves a 'being-together without place or body — a being-together that is a being-between: between several places and several identities, several modes of localization and identification', a modern 'errancy' which, 'by declaring the rights of man *and* of the citizen, installs the democratic subject in the infinite span of their separation and their reciprocal contestation' (*NH*, 94, translation modified; cf. *IS*, 81).

It is precisely this heretical orientation of democratic speech — and the ceaseless effort to constrain it — that informs Rancière's conception of politics. 'Political action always acts upon the social as the litigious distribution of places and roles; it is always a matter of knowing who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done in it' (*PA*, 201). The ordinary supervision of places and functions is the business of the 'police' and its attendant mechanisms (education, the division of labour, management of the state and economy). A *political* sequence begins, then, when this supervision is interrupted so as to allow a quasi-anarchic disruption of function and place, a sweeping de-classification of speech. The democratic voice is the voice of those who reject the prevailing social distribution of roles, who refuse the way a society shares out power and authority, the voice of 'floating subjects that deregulate all representations of places and portions' (*D*, 99–100, translation modified; *PS*, 15). A political or democratic sequence begins when the sharing out of social places or functions breaks down in such a way as to allow those who have no clearly defined place to speak or act on behalf of society as a whole. A political sequence is one in which:

there is a whole that constitutes itself other than as a collection of existing parts. For me, this is the only condition under which we can speak of politics. Which doesn't stop there being states, communities, and collectivities, all of which operate according to their different logics. But we must distinguish this very specific form, where the capacity for power is attributed to those who have no *particular* ability to exercise it, where the accounting of the whole is dissociated from any organic conception, from the generality of forms of assembly, government, and domination. (*PA*, 198)

Democracy always works against the pacification of social disruption, against the management of consensus and 'stability'. In classical terms, social stability is the concern of the paranoid *ochlos* — the 'frightening rallying of frightened men', the 'secure' unification of a society around a reassuring distribution of places and roles, around the exclusion of

outsiders, vagrants, or deviants; *demos*, then, names ‘nothing other than the movement whereby the multitude tears itself away from the weighty destiny which seeks to drag it into the corporeal form of the *ochlos* (. . .) Democracy only exists in a society to the degree that the *demos* exists as the power to divide the *ochlos*’ (*SP*, 32).¹⁰ In other words, ‘the people through which democracy occurs is a unity that does not consist of any social group but that superimposes the effectiveness of a sharing of those without-share [*une part des sans-part*] upon the reckoning of society’s various parts [*parties*]. Democracy is the designation of subjects that do not coincide with the parts of the state or of society, floating subjects that deregulate all representations of places and shares’ (*D*, 99–100, translation modified). The concern of democracy is not with the formulation of agreement or the preservation of order but with the invention of new and hitherto unauthorized modes of disaggregation, disagreement and disorder.

It is only a small if not imperceptible shift from here to an interest in the attempt, which Rancière dubs the ‘aesthetic revolution’, to move from a classical, rule-bound conception of art preoccupied with matching any given object with its appropriate form of representation (the basis for a secure distinction of art from non-art) to a regime of art which, in the absence of representational norms, embraces the endless confusion of art and non-art. The classical or representational regime is concerned with hierarchies and norms: the classification of genres, the relative nobility of themes and forms, the persistence of models, the venerable consistency of taste, the canonical rules that govern *belles lettres* (*PM*, 20–7). In the aesthetic regime (whose origins Rancière traces to Schiller, first and foremost), by contrast, genuine art is what indistinguishes, in newly creative ways and with the resources peculiar to a specific artistic practice, art and that which figures as other than art:

What is the kernel of the aesthetic revolution? First of all, negatively, it means the ruin of any art defined as a set of systematisable practices with clear rules. It means the ruin of any art where art’s dignity is defined by the dignity of its subjects — in the end, the ruin of the whole hierarchical conception of art which places tragedy above comedy and history painting above genre painting. To begin with, then, the aesthetic revolution is the idea that everything is material for art, so that art is no longer governed by its subject, by what it speaks of: art can show and speak of everything in the same manner. In this sense, the aesthetic revolution is an extension to infinity of the realm of language, of poetry. It is the affirmation that poems are everywhere, that paintings are everywhere.¹¹

Rancière's examples include Balzac's application of epic modes of description to the banalities of everyday life, or Flaubert's extension of an aristocratic conception of style to a 'democratic' equality of subjects, or Mallarmé's blending of the most subtle movements of syntax with a general 'reframing of the human abode'. Rather than the author of a purely intransitive or hermetic discourse, Mallarmé figures here as the writer who conceives of poetry as *both* the purest possible expression of language and as caught up in the rituals of private, collective and industrial life (in the tiny movements of a dancer, the fluttering of a fan, the fireworks of Bastille Day, all part of that celebration of the ordinary which comes to replace 'the forlorn ceremonies of throne and religion') (AR, 140). Conceived in this sense, 'literarity' figures not as the attribute of a particular quality—harmony, nobility, intransitivity—but as a condition of language in which relations of propriety and authority remain undefined: literarity applies to those forms of 'the written word that circulate without a legitimating system defining the relations between the word's emitter and receiver' (LP, 7). What is distinctive about art are the ways it invents of indistinguishing itself, of proceeding as other than itself, such that the intentional becomes indistinguishable from the unintentional, the voluntary from the involuntary, the known from the unknown, and so on (LP, 7; PS, 31–2).¹²

In the aesthetic regime, in short, art endures as art insofar as it remains fundamentally implicated in non-art, or *life*. This relation between art and life, however, is threatened on three fronts. All are variants on the basic effort that Rancière condemns throughout his work, the effort to put art back in its proper place.

The relation can be broken in favour of the autonomy of either art or life; it also collapses with any attempt to *equate* art and life. The latter risk is the one run by the Romantic effort to aestheticize the whole of life. Balzac's willingness to invest aesthetic experience in any article of ordinary life, for example, his effort to decipher the hidden poetry inscribed in the most banal objects and occasions, eventually leads to a situation in which non-art and art, the ordinary and the extraordinary, become indistinguishable. The line that runs from Balzac to the recycled Pop Art of the 1960s, via Zola and surrealism, is one that culminates in the exhaustion or dissolution of art. 'The prose of everyday life becomes a huge, fantastic poem (. . .) The danger in this case is not that everything becomes prosaic. It is that everything becomes artistic—that the process of exchange, of crossing the border reaches a point where the border becomes completely blurred, where nothing, however prosaic, escapes the domain of art' (AR, 146).

The most extreme alternative to this outcome, of course, is one in which the domain of art is reduced to insignificance. The most important philosophical disqualification of art in favour of life culminates in Hegel's aesthetics. On the one hand, Hegel transfers 'the properties of the aesthetic experience to the work of art itself, cancelling their projection into a new life and invalidating the aesthetic revolution'. On the other hand, Hegel confirms the end of art insofar as he asserts the imminent sufficiency of another discourse, philosophy, adequate to the articulation of the purely immaterial life of the spirit: 'once the content of thought is transparent to itself and when no matter resists it, this success means the end of art' (AR, 142). Along the way, as if in anticipation of Michelet's gesture, successive works of art are 'restored' to (or confined in) their proper place in the story of art's evolution, as so many context-bound contributions to the eventual emancipation of spirit.

Orthodox modernism, by contrast, seeks to purge life, or non-art, from a newly purified conception of art. Modernist art coheres in a domain other than life. The fundamental move here is anticipated by Flaubert, whose *Madame Bovary* is organized entirely around 'the differentiation between the artist and his character, whose chief crime is to wish to bring art into her life. She who wants to aestheticize her life, who makes art a matter of life, deserves death — literarily speaking'.¹³ Modernism isolates art from the adornment of life, from the concerns of 'living well'. As conceived by Greenberg in particular, modernism is a belated and futile attempt to restore (or anticipate) the purity specific to the medium of each particular art, on the assumption that a definitive break with conventional modes of representation will enable the liberating dissolution of content into form. Modernist painters will limit themselves to the possibilities of painting per se (colour, surface, line), purged of figural reference; modernist writers will focus on the mechanics of language and the drama of writing, freed from the burden of communication or meaning, and so on: the medium is purged in each case of the obligation to express anything other than itself.¹⁴

One way of trying to rescue modernism from this unsustainable sterility is to shift its attention to the gap as such, the gap between art and non-art. A properly autonomous avant-garde might then persist insofar as it limits itself to bearing witness to the 'sheer heteronomy' of art, its absolute withdrawal from life (or, since it amounts to the same thing, the absolute alterity of non-art, its infinite withdrawal from the reach of art). This is the move that Rancière associates with Lyotard's aesthetics of the sublime. Lyotard prescribes the task of the avant-garde

as an effort to bear witness to the gap that forever paralyses art's promise to redeem experience, to overcome alienation or commodification. Art's sole task is then to bear witness to an Otherness it cannot evoke or represent, and to denounce any pretension to emancipation or reconciliation. This position leads only to a choice between

either one disaster or another: either the disaster of the sublime, the recognition of the immemorial dependence of the human mind on the immemorial law of the Other inside it, or the greater disaster of the promise of self-emancipation and its completion in either the overt barbarity of Nazi or Soviet totalitarianism or in the soft totalitarianism, the anaesthesia of commodity culture (...) Either the Law of Moses or the law of McDonalds'.¹⁵

Rancière's own recommendation, by contrast, is to persist in the aesthetic revolution as that which both confuses and distinguishes art and non-art, avoiding thereby the two forms of entropy which force the end of art — art dissolved as an aspect of life, or art forever isolated from life. 'The life of art in the aesthetic regime of art consists precisely of a shuttling between these scenarios, playing an autonomy against a heteronomy and a heteronomy against an autonomy, playing one linkage between art and non-art against another such linkage' (AR, 150).

II

It is perhaps the force of this persistence that endures as the most striking and inspiring aspect of Rancière's work. Rancière not only proposes an exceptionally promising way of thinking political and aesthetic questions together, as aspects of a shared problematic (one that refuses, notably, any arbitrarily imposed limit, for instance any vaguely 'ethical' imperative to suspend, in the face of historical catastrophe, the work of representation). He is also rare among recent theorists of either politics or art in that he succeeds in formulating a perspective that owes more to the nineteenth century than it does to the twentieth — a perspective that is rather more secure, as a result, from those disappointments of the later twentieth-century which have left such a mark on so many of his contemporaries.¹⁶ Few thinkers are as indifferent to the prevailing thematics of exhaustion, of the 'end', the 'late' or the 'post'. Rancière persists, above all, in what must surely be remembered as the great philosophical effort both of his generation and of the generation which preceded it: the effort to orient philosophy in line with the primacy of the *subject's* experience of

thought. If philosophy is to be concerned with the general category of the 'other' (the worker, the excluded) it is only insofar as it conceives of the other as subject, and not as the object of its own representation or mis-representation — as subject, and thus as endowed with the same generic freedom, uncertainty, potentiality, as any subject. Rancière prescribes the primacy and equality of subjective experience as the unconditional point of departure for philosophy. This effort aligns his work with Foucault's critique of forms of knowledge and power that serve to objectify or normalize thought; it also links him with the subject-based affirmations variously prescribed by Bergson, Sartre, Lacan, Henry, Rosset, Jambet and Badiou, among others.¹⁷

What is distinctive about Rancière's contribution to this larger project, however, is the care with which he generally avoids the tendency to absolutize the subject, to subtract entirely the category of the subject from 'objective' mediation (the mediation of materiality, of the in-itself, of the imaginary, of the world, of representation). More than many of his contemporaries, Rancière is especially sensitive to the fine line that separates a liberating de-objectification, despecification or denormalization of the subject from something that approximates the absolute evacuation or purification of the subject. In other words, Rancière is careful to distinguish subjectification from identification — identification with the objective categories of occupation, function, status, background, but also identification with the *purely* subjective categories of reflection, prescription or ethics.

One of the models that Rancière follows here is Schiller's 'impurification' of Kant. For Kant, aesthetic perception presumes a wholly disinterested perceiver, one abstracted from his or her position in the situation (on the assumption that such abstraction leaves only the common ground of universal agreement in its wake). The subject of Kant's aesthetic experience is *n'importe qui* in the most literal sense of the phrase — anybody or nobody. For Schiller, by contrast, the emergence of such a subject is grounded in a particular historical (or 'civilizing') process and avoids the empty abstraction of purely rational understanding. The subject of Schiller's aesthetic 'play' is not so much impersonal or dis-interested as re-interested, or interested in new, more imaginative and less restrictive ways. Aesthetic experience involves the distinction but not the isolation of appearance from reality. Imaginative play is a matter not of 'empty indeterminateness' but of an 'active determinability' capable of refiguring the situation as a whole.¹⁸ And it is this activity which sustains an immediate subjective equality, a state in which each individual acts as 'a free citizen

with equal rights'.¹⁹ In Schiller's wake, Rancière is able to treat the 'unreality of representation' not as a simple obstacle to be removed (as it is, for instance, with Deleuze or Badiou) but as a condition to be embraced as an aspect of egalitarian democracy, a condition of speech if not of 'humanity' itself.²⁰

As we have seen, Rancière finds the basic logic of Kant's configuration at work again in Marx, in Sartre, in modernism; in each case his alternative is to 'impurify' the concept in question (the proletariat, the for-itself, artistic autonomy). Everyone thinks, but always as some-one rather than as any-one or no-one. Workers think in terms that challenge the distinction between worker and non-worker (more than they affirm a proletarian indistinction), but they think as workers and under the constraints imposed upon workers. And artists work, as artists and under the constraints that face the production of any particular art, in terms that blur the distinction between art and non-art. Such is the basis of Rancière's discursive materialism: everyone speaks, everyone enjoys the fundamental autonomy of speech, but we speak with words and in circumstances inherited from other speakers. It's a position sensitive to the oppressive appropriation of speech, on the model of Michelet or Braudel. But it's also one that remains wary of a certain pathos of 'depropriation', that resists any quasi-mystical evocation of withdrawal or reserve, a risk evident, for instance, in aspects of some post-Heideggerian work — Derrida, Lacoue-Labarthe, Agamben.

III

The value of Rancière's intervention literally *speaks* for itself in precisely this sense. It also raises, of course, a number of questions and concerns. There is only space to mention two of the most obvious of these here. First, an apparent gap: Rancière affirms universal equality as his point of departure, but he says little about the concrete (if not 'objective') forms of empowerment required to lend this affirmation consequential force. He says little, for instance, about the social changes usually associated with the onset of the 'democratic age' in the early nineteenth century (urbanization, the development of a commercial public sphere, expansion of the press, consolidation of the nation state); he tends to say still less about the precise forms of political organization required to enable or sustain the consequences of democracy as he defines it. In the case of art, he does not dwell on the forms of technical mastery presupposed in any effort to blur the boundary

between art and non-art. He is less interested in the formal rigour of a Flaubert or a Mallarmé, say, than in the quasi-democratic range of reference or inclusion that it allows. Or in the case of pedagogy: any education worthy of the name certainly proceeds within the space opened up by an affirmation of equality, but this affirmation is itself bound up with conditions (of pertinence, encouragement, empowerment) which also have to be met before it will carry any practical force. If the ability to teach is to some extent independent of knowledge or mastery it may be that such independence is as much a result as it is a presupposition. As for the full extent of this independence, Rancière's uncompromising position tends to simplify the issue. 'It is merely a question (in human societies)', Rancière-Jacotot maintain, 'of understanding and speaking a language' or using a tool (*IS*, 37). But does all learning really proceed on the model of language learning? Is even language learning, or tool-using, devoid of explanation as Jacotot conceives it? To what extent is it possible to avoid recourse to the economy of explanation in fields of knowledge that are less accessible, less 'ready-to-hand' than those of natural languages—fields like quantum physics or neurology, for instance? Without a well-developed notion of empowerment, in short, it isn't obvious just how far Rancière evades rather than addresses the factors that might blunt the axiom of equality or disarm its effects. The risk is that Rancière's egalitarianism, like Schiller's aesthetic play, might remain confined to the 'unsubstantial kingdom of the imagination'.²¹

My second question follows on from the first, and concerns Rancière's investment in a liminal thematics of the 'interval' and the 'between', of the hybrid, the indeterminate, the uncertain, and so on. Recall his definition of the democratic or political community as:

a community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local, through which egalitarian logic comes and divides the police community from itself. It is a community of worlds in community that are intervals of subjectification: intervals constructed between identities, between spaces and places. Political being-together is a being-between: between identities, between worlds (...), between several names, several identities, several statuses: between the condition of noisy tool-wielder and the condition of speaking human being, between the condition of citizen and the condition of noncitizenship. (*D*, 137–8)²²

As we have seen, in each of the fields Rancière considers he seeks to discern forms of speech or thought that 'do not designate any specific collection of individuals but rather the very disruption of the relations between names and states of affairs', forms that invent

their own errant trajectory through 'the hazardous intervals between material places and symbolic places, between names and bodies, conditions and knowledge' (NH, 93). But do the thematics of the interval and the between provide, on their own, a sufficient basis for the militant transformation of distinct situations of thought? Affirmation of the between and the non-identical always risks a certain monotony. In other words, despite his critique of the sociological limitations of Sartre's philosophy, the danger is that along each of his various lines of inquiry Rancière comes back to what was, for his predecessor, a point of departure: the undifferentiated description of freedom or consciousness conceived as *néantisation*, consciousness in its subjective and spontaneous indetermination, its ongoing non-coincidence with itself.

It's not clear, in particular, that the thematics of the *interval* as such can give effective analytical purchase on the forms of relation (relations of oppression, exploitation, representation, and so on, but also of solidarity, cooperation, empowerment) that shape any particular situation. In Rancière's work, as in the work of so many of his contemporaries, relation itself often figures as *essentially* binding, as irredeemably contaminated by mastery and the social 'weight' of domination.²³ True equality remains *fully* independent of social mediation — in Jacotot's terms, the rational equality of people is fundamentally incompatible with the necessary inequality of citizens and the unreason of society. In the absence of such mediation, however, Rancière's trenchant egalitarianism seems perfectly compatible with a certain degree of social resignation, even an almost passive acceptance of *de facto* inequalities.²⁴ When pushed, Rancière will defend the deliberately 'inconclusive' status of his investigations.²⁵ Since they assume that truth as such remains elusive and inarticulable, Rancière-Jacotot define egalitarian reason as a sort of permanent discussion that postpones any decisive resolution in favour of a respectful sharing of stories and perspectives: the prevalence of one argument over another is itself 'warlike', a matter of mere 'rhetoric' if not outright 'assault'.²⁶ As a rule, the danger lies not with too much but with too little inconsistency or 'infidelity'.²⁷ True democracy can only be 'sporadic' (SP, 41). Rancière overestimates, perhaps, the distance between such positions and the postmodern posture that he criticizes so effectively. A sporadic, inconsistent and *indecisive* concept of democracy is one that fits rather too comfortably within the parameters of the status quo, within a situation all too easily adapted to flexibility or mobility. How pertinent is Rancière's uneasy blend of axiomatic sophistry to

situations in which only a prescription with binding force can offer any promise of emancipation or change?

Rancière remains a tireless advocate of equality in an age that has reconciled itself to the management of presumed and enforced inequalities. He is one of only a small handful of French thinkers who persist, today, in a genuinely emancipatory conception of philosophy. His insistence, however, on the most fundamental assumption of philosophy—that people *think*—runs the risk of being both too abrupt (thanks to his point of departure) and too inconclusive (thanks to his suspicion of judgement). Consider again, in closing, his critique of Marx (*PP*, 122ff.). Comfortable only with the implacable clarity of radical contradiction or antagonism, the authors of the *Communist Manifesto* certainly aim to clarify the ambivalent status and loyalties of the working class so as to bring it face to face with the implications of a pure class polarization: bourgeois vs. proletariat, with *nothing* ‘in between’. That the Marxist project involves denial of any ambivalent affiliation is plain; so are its shortcomings as a description of working class behaviour and experience. Suspension of such ambivalence, however, is a necessary condition of decisive political action. This is precisely the strategic value of the Marxist prescription, namely the attempt to discern, according to the constraints of a specific situation, the mechanics of a relation that can ultimately have only two terms: exploiter and exploited, dominant and dominated. In this sense the Marxist prescription is an instance of a more general endeavour at issue in every militant philosophical project—the effort to lend a consequential clarity to a subjective relation whose implications are otherwise obscure, and thereby to help illuminate a moment that Rancière’s own work, in the end, does too much to defer: the moment of a decision, the moment of consequence.

PETER HALLWARD
University of Middlesex

NOTES

- 1 I have used the following abbreviations for works by Jacques Rancière:
AR: ‘The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes: Emplotments of Autonomy and Heteronomy’, *New Left Review* 14 (April 2002), 133–51.
D: *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy* [1995], translated by Julie Rose (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
IS: *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* [1987], translated by Kristin Ross (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991).

LP: 'Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement' (interview with Solange Guénoun and James H. Kavanagh), *SubStance* 92 (2000), 3–24.

NH: *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge* [1992], translated by Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

NL: *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France* [1981], translated by John Drury (Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1989).

PA: 'Politics and Aesthetics', interview with Peter Hallward, *Angelaki* 8:2 (2003), 191–212.

PM: *La Parole muette: Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* (Paris, Hachette, 1998).

PP: *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres* (Paris, Fayard, 1983).

PS: *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (Paris, La Fabrique, 2000).

SP: *On the Shores of Politics* [1990], translated by Liz Heron (London, Verso, 1995).

- 2 Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* [1795], translated by Reginald Snell (New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954), 137.
- 3 Louis Althusser, 'Problèmes étudiants', *La Nouvelle Critique* 152 (January 1964), quoted in Kristin Ross, 'Translator's Introduction,' *IS*, xvi.
- 4 'The egalitarian axiom is not based on a common, natural attribute, as is [Enlightenment-based] political philosophy. "Nature" is split in two. The equality of speaking beings intervenes as an addition, as a break with the natural laws of the gravitation of social bodies. The egalitarian axiom defines the potential for egalitarian practices carried out by subjects, and not the rights attributed to individuals and populations.' (LP, 6).
- 5 Cf. Rancière, *La Leçon d'Althusser* (Paris, Gallimard, 1974), 34–5.
- 6 Rancière, 'Good Times or Pleasures at the Barriers' [1978], in *Voices of the People*, edited by Adrian Rifkin and Roger Thomas (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), 50. The joiner and floor-layer Gabriel Gauny (whose writings Rancière collected and edited in *Le Philosophe plézien*, 1983), for instance, learns much from his encounters with Saint-Simonian ideas but refuses the condescending revaluation of work as the basis of a new moral order, one grounded in the integrity of 'a job well done'. Instead, Gauny explores the inconsistent and unstable condition of being a manual labourer who *also* writes and philosophizes, he embraces the very precariousness of his position as enabling a certain degree of freedom, self-criticism and detachment.
- 7 See in particular Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *The Inheritors: French Students and their Relations to Culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1979) and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London, Sage, 1977).
- 8 Michelet, quoted in *NH*, 45–6.

- 9 Braudel, quoted in *NH*, 17.
- 10 Cf. 102–3. ‘Democracy is the paradoxical government of those who do not embody any title for governing the community.’ (LP, 19).
- 11 PA, 205. ‘In the aesthetic regime of art, art is art to the extent that it is something other than art.’ (AR, 137).
- 12 Cf. *PM*, 9–10.
- 13 AR, 147. Adorno’s condemnation of Stravinsky will invoke a similar logic (cf. Rancière, ‘From Lyotard to Schiller: Two Readings of Kant and their Political Significance’, *Radical Philosophy* 126 (July 2004), 11).
- 14 Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ [1937], in Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1961), 6–8; cf. *PS*, 18–19.
- 15 Rancière, ‘From Lyotard to Schiller’, 15.
- 16 Few contemporary thinkers can rival the force with which Rancière condemns that ‘shameless inanity with which today some proclaim the opening of a time that is henceforth without history and delivered solely to the performance of the “winners”’ (*NH*, 102).
- 17 For more on this shared thematic, see Hallward, ‘The One or the Other: French Philosophy Today’, *Angelaki* 8:2 (2003), 1–32.
- 18 Schiller, *Letters*, 98–101.
- 19 Schiller, *Letters*, 140.
- 20 ‘The democratic man is a being who speaks, which is also to say a poetic being, a being capable of embracing a distance between words and things which is not deception, not trickery, but humanity’ (*SP*, 51).
- 21 Schiller, *Letters*, 128.
- 22 Cf. *NH*, 98. Rancière is remarkably close, on this point, to positions endorsed by postcolonial critics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak.
- 23 See for instance *IS*, 77. As Badiou notes, Rancière’s presumption is that ‘every social tie implies a master’ (Alain Badiou, *Abrégé de métapolitique*, Paris, Seuil, 1998, 123).
- 24 See for instance *IS*, 89, 134. Like Jacotot before him, Rancière is clearly most comfortable defending a cause whose integrity is guaranteed but whose implications will never ‘take on’ (139)—proof, perhaps, of a willingness positively to embrace what Hegel derided as the position of the ‘unhappy consciousness’.
- 25 Quoted in Badiou, *Abrégé de métapolitique*, 125.
- 26 ‘What carries the decree—just as against a fortification—is assault, words, the decisive gesture’ (*IS*, 94). Again, ‘Reason commands us to speak always; rhetorical irrationality speaks only to bring about the moment of silence’, the moment in which one side prevails over another (85).
- 27 Rancière, *La Chair des mots: Politiques de l’écriture* (Paris, Galilée, 1998), 11.

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