

Introduction: Jacques Rancière and the Novel

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Jacques Rancière has long been recognized as one of the most important philosophers currently working on questions of aesthetics. His writing has reverberated widely, both geographically and across the disciplines, taking in political theory, the philosophy of work and labor, film, literature, contemporary painting, and photography. Over the past decade his work has undertaken a sustained, multi-disciplinary (or transdisciplinary) reflection on the politics of aesthetics. This intervention has achieved nothing less than a reconfiguration of the relations between ideology and pedagogy, the formation of the disciplines, and the politics of artistic production and reception. The power of this reconfiguration is apparent in almost every reading of Rancière, for I am liable to find my own private convictions, personal discoveries, cherished methods, and ways of proceeding reflected back to me in his work, newly exposed as an element within a particular “distribution of the sensible,” in Rancière’s influential phrase. At the beginning of his book *The Politics of Literature*, Rancière characterizes the literary regime—the distinct formation that, around the turn of the nineteenth century, introduced a redistribution of the sensible to the European aesthetic tradition—as “a relationship between three things”:

a way of writing that tends to remove [soustraire] meanings; a way of reading that sees this withdrawal of sense as a symptom; and, finally, the possibility of interpreting the political significance of such a symptom in ways that are opposed. The indifference of writing, the practice of symptomatic reading and the ambivalence of this practice are part and parcel of the same mechanism. And this mechanism could well be literature itself—literature as a historic system of identification of the art of writing, as a specific nexus between a system of meaning of words and a system of visibility of things. (9)

The phrase that is here translated as “part and parcel of the same mechanism” is “appartiennent à un même dispositif” (*Politique* 17). *Dispositif*, a Foucauldian term usually translated as “apparatus,” has a specific sense in Michel Foucault’s work, one outlined by Foucault himself in a conversation recorded soon after the publication of *La Volonté de savoir* (1976): “What I’m trying to pick out with this term is . . . a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. . . . The apparatus . . . is the system of relations that can be established between these elements” (*Power/Knowledge* 194).

In Rancière’s conception of the literary regime, the apparatus is our own. We recognize it as the prevailing understanding of literature in university classrooms and the pages of literary magazines in the United States, Europe, and around the world. As in Louis Althusser’s theory of ideology, the conditions of modern literary

discourse have the status of an “obviousness” (Althusser, *Lenin* 116): the obviousness that literary utterances cannot be translated directly into political or social truths; the obviousness that there are no formal or social barriers to what may be represented in a work of fiction; the obviousness that the critic has the jurisdiction to bring to bear theoretical resources on the work that may inflect its meaning in ways that are radically at odds with its content; the obviousness that the number of such potential readings is infinite.

But Rancière is taking more from Foucault than an analytical term. *Dispositif* implies a principle according to which the critic can no longer assume a privileged position with respect to his or her object, for any such positionality suggests the possibility of extracting oneself from the apparatus, and it suggests too a theology of signification: the assumption of an unspoken element “slumber[ing] within speech” to be revealed by the work of the critic (Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic* xviii). Such assumptions were decried by Foucault with the term *commentary*: the “fate,” as Foucault described it, of every critic who works in the mode of exegesis (xix).

Rancière’s project is formed by the same antipathy to commentary, except that for Rancière the antipathy is the result of a political rather than a historical intuition. Accordingly, it is not at all clear that the literary regime is being denounced or subjected to critique in Rancière’s anatomization of it. This is the quality of Rancière’s thought that has caused the most difficulty for those trying to summarize or paraphrase it. For Rancière, the literary regime is a “democratic” form; that quality rests not on its function of representation but on the nature of its distribution of the sensible: that is to say, on how it resolves the question of the sayable, or the question of who is and who is not entitled to speak. Literature’s answer to these questions—Gustave Flaubert’s answer, as dramatized in *Madame Bovary*—is *anything* and *anyone* (Rancière, *Politics of Literature* 12, 13).

Rancière has not organized his approach to literature into anything like a theory of the novel. It is not obvious that the novel could be theorized as such, in Rancière’s schema, without weakening this sense of a literary regime as a practice or set of practices in which not only the work but our habits of reading and interpretation, the organization of literary fields and genres within the academy, and the role of theorization itself in solidifying the text as an object of study are all implicated. Nevertheless, it is in precisely this capacity that Rancière’s writing on aesthetics constitutes the most significant contribution to the theory of the novel in the last thirty years. For, considered as an apparatus, a regime, the novel is liberated from its formal delineation and recomposed as a logic, a structure of disconnection, much like the “dissonance” that Georg Lukács ascribed to the novel, born of “the refusal of the immanence of being to enter into empirical life” (*Theory of the Novel* 71). When Rancière talks about the literary regime, it is primarily the world of the novel he is talking about.

For Rancière, the novel designates, in the first instance, what is conventionally known as the nineteenth-century realist novel. But Rancière’s account of the novel—most notably, his insistence that realism has nothing to do with representation—has enormous implications for the historical chronology of the novel, conceived as a development through successive phases of (say) realism, modernism, postmodernism, and beyond. In Rancière’s account, the formal principles of the novel, as

rehearsed in *Madame Bovary*, have not altered substantially despite the changes that took place in the novel during the twentieth century, changes held by most critics to be radical and consequential. According to Rancière, it is with Flaubert (and not Beckett or Pynchon) that the novel awakens to the fact that literary language is no longer determined by any relation of appropriateness to its subject matter. The “descriptive excess” of the novel, as he puts it, is evidence not of the operation of a “reality effect” (Barthes) but, on the contrary, of a break in the arrangement according to which words are judged by their quotient of truth, or significance. Rancière describes this break as the loss of “a certain sort of action and a certain way of linking action and significance” (*Politics of Literature* 9) and a deterioration of the old “affinity [*adéquation*] between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking” (10). The regime of belles lettres, of rhetoric—a hierarchical regime in which literary utterances are delimited by concerns of appropriateness (of content) and qualification (to speak)—is in the novel replaced by a new “democratic” quality of “indifference” (11).

What has been so fascinating about Rancière’s work is that this argument is made not in relation to modernist or experimental forms but to realist ones. The paradox and suggestiveness of Rancière’s thought, when it comes to the novel, puts his work in conversation with that of the boldest figures in the novel theory tradition. As in Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony—a discovery of Bakhtin’s that he attributes entirely to his first object of study, Dostoevsky—or like the concept of “symptomatic reading” discovered by Rancière’s own one-time mentor and collaborator Louis Althusser but which Althusser credits to Marx’s *Capital* (“From *Capital* to Marx’s Philosophy”), Rancière’s practice of the redistribution of perception is not an insight of the philosopher or critic but an achievement of the object of study—of the works of Flaubert and Proust themselves. The democratization of literature, this is to say, is not an undertaking that critics and intellectuals can hope to effect with respect to the novel. Insofar as we conceive our role in such terms, we hinder and imperil the novel’s most profound political effects: the principle of equality (anything and anyone can be the subject of the novel), of “mute speech” (nothing that is said in the novel is said by it), and of the work’s potentially infinite interpretability.

Rancière’s work on literature is thus a lesson in the present-day politics of reading as much as a disquisition on the formal properties of the nineteenth-century novel. In the apparent ambiguity of his critical positions,¹ Rancière is adhering to the principles that he finds embedded in his textual objects. Foremost among these is the disbursal of the capacity to think: away from the figure of the intellectual and toward the objects of analysis themselves. If there is a lesson to take away from Rancière’s work, observes Davide Panagia in his essay in this issue of *Novel*, it is an “unteachable” one, a lesson that Rancière cannot put into words without negating it. If we look to Rancière’s writing for a critical position on the works he examines—a position we can ascribe to him, with which we can either agree or disagree, and that we can debate in the course of coming to an understanding of it—then we are likely to be disappointed. For Rancière’s conception of politics, writes

¹ Bruno Bosteels describes Rancière’s method—pertinently but irreverently—as “a certain shyness [elevated] into a methodological principle” (164).

Panagia, “is not a project of the understanding, and to the extent that philosophy desires understanding, it must remain tethered to the conditions of necessity that structure and arrange an order of police.”

Such, at least, is one possible resolution of the quandaries that Rancière’s method presents to us as readers. A method, of course, is in part a mode of critical writing. And Rancière’s method may be said to emerge directly from his great study of the nineteenth-century pedagogue Joseph Jacotot, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Like the bilingual edition of François Fénelon’s *Télémaque* that Jacotot distributes to his language students, a work of literature is not, for Rancière, an entity to be penetrated but a “thing” that two or more readers (which necessarily includes the critic) may have “in common” (*Ignorant Schoolmaster* 2): “A material thing is first of all ‘the only bridge of communication between two minds.’ The bridge is a passage, but it is also distance maintained. The materiality of the book keeps two minds at an equal distance, whereas explication is the annihilation of one mind by another. . . . The ignorant examiner’s art is to ‘bring the examinee back to the material objects, to a *thing* that he can verify with his senses’” (32).

It is in the refusal of understanding—one of those concepts that “throws a veil over everything”—and thus the refusal of the very logic of the “explicative system” (6) that Rancière’s critical positions may be seen to be preceded by the novel; that the novel has supplied the discursive conditions for Rancière’s thinking. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière is careful never to proclaim himself a follower of Jacotot, never to mobilize Jacotot’s insights directly as solutions for our own present. As Kristin Ross has observed, the status of the example in Rancière’s thinking bespeaks his “obstinate insistence on staying at the level of the particular case.” The historical figures that interest Rancière are “framed like literary characters” (25). Rancière’s “peculiar and powerful version of transdisciplinarity” is not a positive synthesis, a combination of knowledges, but agonistic. Rancière’s procedure, says Ross, is “to use one to undermine and contest the other: to use history against philosophy, or literature against political theory”; thus history is given “much the same power Rancière grants to fiction: that of reframing, and thus expanding, perception, reconfiguring what is thinkable, scrambling perception management” (*ibid.*).

This is also what Bruno Bosteels is referring to when he writes of Rancière’s “brilliant use of the free indirect style” as a condition of Rancière’s discourse (159). That condition does not seem limited to Rancière’s discussion of the work of his interlocutors and precursors. Even when he defines politics as the “distribution of the sensible” (“Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the capacity to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” [*Politics of Aesthetics* 13]), one is never finally sure that this definition is not itself, say, a symptom of a general aestheticization of the political sphere; that Rancière is not withholding some other, virtual or unspeakable sense of politics, in which the meaning of words would be determined not by the “miscount” peculiar to aesthetics but by the long lost “adequation” (between “ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking”).

Despite that “brilliant” use of free indirect discourse, indeed, Bosteels has indicated that things may be more complicated in Rancière’s work; that Rancière himself is “no Jacotot” (159). The other way of resolving these quandaries, a way

that seems incompatible with the first, is to insist upon certain crucial differences between the conditions of political discourse and those of aesthetics. Politics may not be a “project of the understanding”; nevertheless, as Rancière puts it in “Literary Misunderstanding,” political disagreement and literary disagreement are “divergent” paths, such that political disagreement, while being no less a mode of “dissensus,” nevertheless works as an operation of subjectivation. While literature “dissolves the subjects of utterance in the fabric of the percepts and affects of anonymous life,” the task of politics is to identify the anonymous—what Rancière calls in *Disagreement* “those who have no part” (30, 123)—as a “collective, an *us*” (*Politics of Literature* 43). By contrast, the politics of literature are merely “its own”—a “metapolitics” forever removed from the task of configuring “a polemical common world of political judgment and action” (44). Rancière’s writings on aesthetics, taken together, would seem to be an infinitely closeted critique of aesthetic discourse, one that cannot admit to being so without finding itself in the despised position of the explicator, delivering the truth in a manner akin to that of an omniscient narrator. To suggest as much, however, is to subject Rancière to a form of interpretation that the entire apparatus of his work seems organized to make impossible even while, with the prerogative that comes with the use of free indirect discourse, the work convicts us of not being capable of it.

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It was with a sense of these imbrications that the editors of *Novel* invited Rancière to address the Society for Novel Studies conference, “Novel Worlds,” at Duke University in April 2012. The essay that opens the issue, titled “The Thread of the Novel,” is a revised version of the talk he gave on that occasion, and it amounts to Rancière’s most direct statement to date on the logic (which is to say the *dispositif*) of the novel. The writer under discussion is one whom Rancière has regularly cited as an influence on his own writing: Virginia Woolf, perhaps the greatest practitioner of free indirect style in the English language. In works such as *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*, Rancière identifies a “twofold” logic. On one hand there is the logic of mere succession, of things “as they happen”; on the other, a logic of plot, or causal relations. Rancière will draw on Aristotelian categories (the *kath’ekaston* and the *katholou*) as well as Deleuzian ones (the haecceities and the sensorimotor schema) to dramatize this distinction. The reference to Gilles Deleuze, who is unnamed in the essay but (as in all of Rancière’s writings on aesthetics) a perpetual presence, helps to clarify the stakes of Rancière’s intervention. Why does Septimus Smith, an embodiment of the *kath’ekaston*, have to be killed? For Rancière, it is in order that the distribution of the sensible that is peculiar to the novel, the negotiation between truth and plot, can take place; that is, so that the Deleuzian logic of the haecceities (the sensorimotor collapse) can be established as a logic of madness. “There is no proper thread allowing the luminous halo to dismiss the logic of the plot,” says Rancière, just as he has earlier said of Deleuze’s work on cinema that there is no image, nothing “identifiable” in the history of cinema that corresponds to the pure time-image or op-sign (*Film Fables* 113–14). The Deleuzian distinction between the movement-image and the time-image is for this reason “strictly transcendental,” says Rancière (*ibid.*).

The gap between the two logics—the haecceities and the plot—is also the terrain of the novel. But for Rancière, the rationality of the novel is defined by “compromise” rather than by a sense of the perpetually pending, perpetually deferred emergence of the thought of what Deleuze calls the interstice.² The novel bridges the two worlds, but, as in Jacotot, the bridge is both “a passage” and a “distance maintained.” In the crucial episode titled “Time Passes,” Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* allows the logic of the haecceities (almost) full expression. The bridge between the two logics has become a threadbare connection, consisting merely of the square brackets that frame the human order of activity. For Deleuze, everything is predicated on the logic of the alibi: that the haecceities require a plot in order to attain expression, a logic that is in full operation in Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s book on Kafka. For Rancière, the emphasis is on the other foot: the logic of compromise. The idea that there seems no way around in Rancière is that “the lyricism of truth cannot construct a fictional whole by itself,” that the “fluid substance of life, pouring through the sentences of the novelist, does not exist” (this issue 206).

Rancière’s essay is joined in the issue by five articles that consider the impact of his thought on the novel in several distinct areas: nineteenth-century British realism (Elizabeth Gaskell and Thomas Hardy), contemporary postcolonial fiction (the Algerian novelist Tahar Djaout and the South African–Australian novelist J. M. Coetzee), and (in Panagia’s article) in relation to Rancière’s own writing.

Elaine Freedgood’s “The Novelist and Her Poor” transposes the terms of Rancière’s analysis of *Madame Bovary* to the English context and discovers crucial differences between French and British realism. Most especially, what we see in Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* is the survival of the “aristocratic” mode, even as the novelist attempts to do justice to the working poor. As Rancière’s account of realism enables us to see, Gaskell—the emblematic novelist of nineteenth-century British realism—is not in fact a realist writer at all; the true generic descriptor of Gaskell’s writing, Freedgood notes, is melodrama. The interiorities of the poor remain beyond Gaskell’s capacities—just as the only political solution to poverty put forward by *Mary Barton* is charitable giving. Free indirect discourse is of little importance in Gaskell; but, paradoxically, its absence preserves an elliptical (though virtual, nonrealized) site of self-representation for the characters. What this also implies is the delayed appearance, in the British context, of what Rancière calls the aesthetic regime: that staging of differences that enables Flaubert to elevate the “democratic” vision of the artist over the democratic interests of the people.

Emily Steinlight’s essay explores Rancière’s conception of politics in relation to Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure*, a novel whose most harrowing event—the suicide of three impoverished siblings and its accompanying note (“done because we are too menny”)—renders visible (for the first time in Victorian literature, according to Steinlight) the self-recognition of the disposable *as* disposable. For Rancière, in *Disagreement*, politics is “whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise.” Political activity is thus “a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the

² See Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (esp. chap. 7, “Thought and Cinema”).

police order" (30). According to Steinlight, such insights help us overcome the critical thematic of Hardy's "fatalism." As in *Mrs. Dalloway*, she says, the political distinction of the novel is that "nothing is a given, that birth is not destiny." As Rancière points out, this does not mean that the novel is solely the product of a creative imagination but, on the contrary, that the novelistic imagination "is caught up in the banal fabric of reality, where the ordinary and the extraordinary are no longer distinguishable" (*Politics of Literature* 156). Central to the politics of Hardy's writing, says Steinlight, is its "obsessive production of pathologies, atavistic crimes, and hysterical symptoms": ways in which the "physiological and subjective parameters assigned to the experience of any individual" are exceeded. For Steinlight, the "too menny" in Hardy's (and every) novel is, implicitly, ourselves. This is a statement of the irreducible "political" quality of the novel form.

In "An Incalculable Rupture? The Aesthetics and Politics of Postcolonial Fiction," Raji Vallury also takes issue with the hypothesis that has been posited, several times, as a resolution of the quandaries that Rancière's work raises for all critical readers: the separation of aesthetics and politics. Like Steinlight and Freedgood, Vallury is transposing the field of application of Rancière's work, this time to that of Francophone postcolonial literature. Vallury wants to insist (against Rancière's closeted critique) that literature can be something other than an "epiphenomenon of a truer and deeper historical reality"—and she uses Rancière's concepts to make this case. The category that is implicitly rejected in Vallury's work on literature, then, is "metapolitics": the term with which Rancière establishes the removal of aesthetics from the task of configuring "a polemical common world of political judgment and action." Vallury is unambiguous on this point: "Literary anonymity and impersonality inscribe an emancipatory politics of equality and democracy through the enunciation of new modes of visibility and perceptibility." In Tahar Djaout's *The Last Summer of Reason*, such new modes take a form similar to what we have seen in other texts (including, perhaps, in Rancière's own writing): not the enunciation of a collective "we" but, rather, a "dramaturgy" of "singular and powerless" anonymous individuals and a featureless man as a narrator. The "incalculable rupture between aesthetics and politics" that Vallury establishes as the crucial lesson of the novel is in fact a redistribution that, like Rancière's own use of free indirect discourse, "locate[s] the potential for emancipation in the reader."

Sarah Winter's article "The Magistrate, the Camp, and the Novel: J. M. Coetzee and the Subject of Human Rights," like the other pieces here, straddles the two regimes of aesthetics and politics that form the parameters of Rancière's work. The motif that interests her is one she calls the "chastened magistrate," the most troubling fictional instance of which is the protagonist of Coetzee's novel *Waiting for the Barbarians*. Winter identifies precursors for Coetzee's character not only in English novels (by authors such as Henry Fielding and Jane Austen) but in the history of legal rulings in the context of British abolitionism, such as the *Somerset* decision of 1772, presided over by Lord Mansfield. For common law jurisprudence permitted such figures to "decide according to conscience" in exceptional situations. Like Vallury and Steinlight, then, Winter insists on a directly political role for the novel in spite of Rancière's ambiguity on this question. Coetzee's "novelization" of the motif of the chastened magistrate, she suggests, may enable a greater understanding of

“the politicization [i.e., the dissensus] that Rancière finds inherent in aesthetic mediation,” if we understand the novel not in its quality as a work of fictional representation but as a mode of thought. The chastened magistrate, for Winter, is nothing less than the figure of the “universal intellectual,” the figure imagined in its “fullest manifestation” by Foucault, in turn, as the writer. Thus Winter’s discussion, like Vallury’s, makes explicit the degree to which dissensus is a figure full of significance and potential for our activity as critics and readers of literature.

Many of the pieces collected in this issue of *Novel* make use of Rancière’s work in the context of literary analysis only by radically qualifying certain features of his thinking—especially when it comes to the nature of literature as a “regime.” The most notable such feature is the one alluded to above with the term *metapolitics*: the claim that the politics of literature are primarily “its own”; that literature is a regime of “loosening bodies from the meanings that people want them to take on” (*Politics of Literature* 44). In an interview with Rancière that Abraham Geil conducted for this issue, Rancière offers a new articulation of this principle: “At a certain point, literature chooses the equality of the atoms, the equality of the luminous halo within which the atoms flow, and it chooses it against the equality of democratic subjects or the equality of those sons of artisans, peasants, or country parsons who want to live adventurous lives, love literature, aesthetics, et cetera.”

At a certain point, says Rancière, meaning—presumably—the moment Flaubert decides to do away with Emma Bovary or Virginia Woolf decides to send Septimus Smith out of the window, or the moment at which (in a remark so throwaway as to stretch the thread almost to breaking point) Bernard tells us, while absorbed in the sensory phenomena of the Strand, of the suicide of Rhoda (*Waves* 281). But how is one to select any such moment of decision or choice as the determining one? Who is to say that such moments should not also be regarded under the category of the haecceities? Why take away from such moments their quality of being “ideologemes” (as Bakhtin would have it [*Dialogic Imagination* 333])—of having no more importance to the expressive actuality of the novel than any utterance by any character whatever?

Perhaps it is the case that “nothing is a given” in Rancière’s writing also; that Rancière’s thought is most useful to literary scholars when we extend the dialogical qualities of the novel to Rancière’s own linguistic output; when we consider his writing, even when it appears to betray this quality, under the sign of dissensus—as resistant to the “explicative system.”

Unless—to address the quandary from the other side—the condition of accommodating Rancière’s work into literary studies is our refusal, or suppression, of all those moments in his work that seek to remind us that we too, as readers and scholars of literature, are irreducibly agents of a “regime.”

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