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Jacques Rancière:
Literature, Politics, Aesthetics:
Approaches to Democratic Disagreement

interviewed by Solange Guénoun and James H. Kavanagh

"Pour que l'invitation produise quelque effet de pensée, il faut que la rencontre trouve son point de mésentente."--La mésentente (12)

[In order for the invitation to produce some effect of thought, the encounter must find its point of disagreement.]

The Principles of Equality, Education and Democracy

SG In reading your work, one has the impression that you have had a kind of revelation or "nuit de Pascal" in encountering that extraordinary nineteenth-century pedagogue, Joseph Jacotot, to whom you have devoted a book, *Le maître ignorant* (1987).

JR It was not a "nuit de Pascal," but certainly an essential encounter for re-asking the question of politics and equality. In fact, Joseph Jacotot proposed, in an incredibly provocative way, two radical principles that placed the pedagogical paradigm alongside the progressivist logic generally identified with democracy. First of all, equality is not a goal to be attained. The progressivists who proclaim equality as the end result of a process of reducing inequalities, of educating the masses, etc., reproduce the logic of the teacher who assures his power by being in charge of the gap he claims to bridge between ignorance and knowledge. Equality must be seen as a point of departure, and not as a destination. We must assume that all intelligences are equal, and work under this assumption. But also, Jacotot raised a radical provocation to democratic politics. For him, equality could only be intellectual equality among individuals. It could never have a social consistency. Any attempt to realize it socially led to its loss. It seemed to me that every form of egalitarian politics was confronted by this challenge: to affirm equality as an axiom, as an assumption, and not as a goal. But also to refuse a partition between intellectual equality and social inequality; to believe that even if egalitarian assumptions are alien to social logic and [End Page 3] aggregation, they can be affirmed there transgressively, and that politics consists of this very confrontation.

SG What strikes me is the way this has allowed you to intervene in the politico-socialist conjunction in the 1980s, on the ever-burning questions of education and teaching in France, and thereby to carve out a place for yourself vis-à-vis the two then-current forms of "progressivism."

JR The French debate over democratic schooling was at that time--and still is--monopolized by two positions. On the one hand, the sociological tendency, inspired by Bourdieu, was calling into question forms of transmitting knowledge adapted to an audience of young "heirs." It proposed to reduce scholastic inequality by adapting the style of the schools to the needs and styles of underprivileged populations. On the other hand we saw the development of the so-called "republican" thesis, summarized in Jean-

Claude Milner's *De l'école*, which made the universality of knowledge and its mode of diffusion the royal road to democratization, and denounced teachers and sociologists as destroyers of republican schools. Jacotot's ideas about intellectual emancipation placed back-to-back these two positions, which based equality either on the universality of knowledge and the teacher's role, or on a "science" of the social arrangement for transmitting knowledge.

SG One of the striking aspects of your work is that it presents both a series of shifts from one discipline to another, and the recurring quest for an object that will cut across all these disciplines. Thus, you have passed from "the poetics of knowledge" in history, to literary criticism with your interpretation of Mallarmé's work, and finally to the concept of literature, and now you are concerned, among other things, with "the aesthetic idea" and with cinema. While all the time pursuing, from one terrain to the other, an object that relates to politics, as can be seen by most of your subtitles: *La mésentente. Philosophie et politique* (1995), *Mallarmé. La politique de la sirène* (1996), *La chair des mots. Politiques de l'écriture* (1998). Without mentioning *Aux bords du politique*, published in 1990, with the new, completely reworked edition appearing in 1998.

JR The question of politics and the method of my "shifts" are closely linked to each other. For me, the political always comes into play in questions of divisions and boundaries. I chose the title *La nuit des prolétaires* for my [End Page 4] book on the emancipation of the worker in nineteenth-century France because at the heart of this emancipation was the breaking of the natural division of time that dictated that workers must work by day and sleep by night and have no time left over for thinking. The workers' emancipation came about through workers who decided to devote their nights to other activities than sleep, to give themselves this time that did not belong to them in order to enter into a world of writing and thinking that was not "theirs." To take this into account, I needed to break the boundary that is supposed to separate genres--history, philosophy, literature, political science. In principle, my workers belonged to "social history." In other words, their texts were read as documents expressing the condition of workers, popular culture, etc. I decided to read them in a different way--as literary and philosophical texts. Where others were attempting to read about workers' problems expressed in the language of the people, I saw, on the other hand, a struggle to cross the barrier between languages and worlds, to vindicate access to the common language and to the discourse on the community. As opposed to culturalism, which sought to restore a "popular culture," I valorized the attitude of those workers who challenged that so-called "popular culture" and made an attempt to appropriate another's culture (i.e. that of the "iterate"). The idea of a "poetics of knowledge" that would cut across all disciplines thus expresses a very close relationship between subject and method. *La nuit des prolétaires* was a "political" book in that it ignored the division between "scientific" and "literary" or between "social" and "ideological," in order to take into account the struggle by which the proletariat sought to reappropriate for themselves a common language that had been appropriated by others, and to affirm transgressively the assumption of equality.

SG All of which led you to redefine the role of "spokespersons."

JR In traditional logic, the "spokesperson" is the one who express the thought, feeling, and way of life of a group. I showed, on the contrary, that a spokesperson is first of all the person who breaks this logic of expression, the one who puts words into circulation--that is, who uproots words from their assigned mode of speaking or of being, according

to which workers should speak in "workers' style" and the masses should express themselves in "popular culture." The basic problem was to show that many efforts that believe they "respect others' differences" by entering into "their" language and "their" ways of thinking, only repeat Plato's adage that one should stay in his/her place and do his/her own thing. [End Page 5]

JHK Obviously the basis of your work is a very strong commitment to the concept of equality, and you want to distinguish yourself from a republican notion of equality. But it seems to me that any social sense of equality is already structured and determined in some way. Would you agree to that? Or are you posing a non-structured sense of equality?

JR If equality is axiomatic, a given, it is clear that this axiom is entirely undetermined in its principle--that it is anterior to the constitution of a determined political field, since it makes the latter possible in the first place. This being said, the egalitarian axiom defines the practices, the modes of expression and manifestation that are themselves always determined by a particular state of inequality and by the potential for equality.

JHK Isn't that an Enlightenment idea? That "all men are created equal," prior to politics. Aren't you then back with an eighteenth-century republican notion of equality?

JR No. First of all because Enlightenment thought does not in any way imply an assumption of equality. From this point of view, the Declaration of the Rights of Man exceeds Enlightenment philosophy. It also "qualifies" equality of rights by "difference in talent." And most important, the egalitarian axiom is not based on a common, natural attribute, as is 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. Finally, the egalitarian axiom defines the potential for egalitarian practices carried out by subjects, and not the rights attributed to individuals and populations, with institutions specializing in the "reduction" of the distance between right and fact.

The Concept of Literature and the Change in Paradigm:

The Disagreements of Literary Criticism

SG Let's talk about the change in paradigm you detect in the passage from "Belles Lettres" to "literature," in the particular sense that you understand the latter. What struck me, in reading *La parole muette. Essais sur les contradictions de la littérature* (1998), is the somewhat hasty way in which you describe Belles Lettres as completely concerned with a representative system of "the art of writing," basing your conclusions, for example, on Boileau, Huet, Voltaire, and Batteux, or on historians and poetics of contemporary literature such as Marc Fumaroli and Gérard Genette, without [End Page 6] your personally grappling with texts written during this long period. Whereas elsewhere, you propose very complex and detailed analyses of post-Revolutionary texts to illustrate your concept of literature. Why this difference in treatment, which results in two more or less homogeneous ensembles--Belles Lettres on the one hand, and literature on the other--and a change in paradigm between the two, but which does not seem willing or able to take into account the complexity of the Belles Lettres representative system, to put it in your terms?

JR First of all, I have approached literature as an established system of the art of writing, which became consolidated in the nineteenth century. I have shown how its paradigms are constituted in opposition to the kind of order they destroyed--the Belles Let-

tres paradigms. The "difference in treatment" is justified not only by my specific subject (literature as a system of specific thought, not as a collection of works), but also by the fact that the Belles Lettres paradigms were, for Hugo, Balzac or Flaubert, summarized in the systematization given by eighteenth-century French theoreticians, as a culmination of the system originating in Aristotle's Poetics. I compared two systems for identifying the art of writing, and not two ways of writing in two different eras. The representative system is characterized by the very gap between the rules of the "poetic arts" and the multitude of writings that do not obey them. On the other hand, literature no longer recognizes "rules of art" or boundaries. Thus the new paradigm must be sought in the works themselves. Clearly, a mass of earlier writings and writing practices were outside or on the margins of the Belles Lettres system. And the Age of Romanticism either vindicated the authors, epochs and forms that had been excluded by Belles Lettres (especially the novel, that genre without a genre), or else it reinvented a "classicism" of its own. When we compare a baroque interpretation of Corneille or Racine to Voltaire's reading of them, we are able to do so within the historicization that belongs to the age of literature.

JHK You propose another conception of literature with no relation to the art of writing, when you speak of members of the proletariat seeking to affirm themselves as speaking subjects by appropriating a common language already appropriated by others.

JR I call "literarity" this status of the written word that circulates without a legitimating system defining the relations between the word's emitter and receiver. I'm referring here to Plato's opposition between the "living" word of the teacher sown into the soul of the disciple, and the [End Page 7] written, "mute" word, which goes hither and yon without knowing to whom it should or should not speak. For me, the word "literarity" is empty if one takes this to mean "ownership" by a specific language, conferring on texts a "literary" quality (the famous "intransitivity" that has no consistency). There is no direct relationship between literature as a political system of circulating words and literature as an historical system of the art of writing. On the contrary, there is a strong tension between the two. A recurring theme of novels is the woe of the person having had the misfortune to read novels.

SG I can imagine how your use of the word "literarity" (that propensity of the inventive literary animal that we all are) can cause misunderstandings with the identical but unrelated term ("literarity") so much in vogue in the heyday of literary theory-- misunderstandings especially among those who have been debating these things for more than 40 years. It's interesting to note that in *Le Monde* the same article reviewed your books and Antoine Compagnon's *Le démon de la théorie* (Seuil, 1998), which proposes an assessment of literary theory. It's clear to me that your *La parole muette. Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* has, paradoxically, been inscribed in this existential horizon, without speaking directly about literary theory, but by soliciting it constantly by terms and notions that are highly codified and dated, like "literarity," "significance," "symbolic structuration," etc.

JR I haven't been much involved in "literary theory." What I call "literarity" is linked to a problem of symbolic partitioning that is much older and larger, and concerns what I call the partition of the sensible/perceptible [*le partage du sensible*]: 1 the distribution of words, time, space. What led me there was not literary theory of the 1960s-70s. It's the question of the partition within both language and thought, as I had felt it while working

on *La nuit des prolétaires*, especially in the workers' accounts--in fact fictionalized--of their discovery of the world of writing via food wrappers or other scraps of paper.

SG You are proposing two modes of the fictive--a mimetic-fictive, which was the basis of the Belles Lettres system, according to you--and a fictive that belongs to the system of literature "as a process of the human spirit," as you put it, quoting Mallarmé. Do you mean that Belles Letters cannot entail another mode of fiction (invention) that would co-exist with fiction-imitation? For example, Vincent Descombes rethought "classical" writers' imitation of the Ancients as a new principle allowing art to detach itself from questions [End Page 8] of truth and from religion, thus paradoxically making les Anciens more modern than les Modernes (contrary to Habermas) and stressing the role of classical writers in the arrival of the modern conception of literature. And recently you wrote that "The politics of art, like all fields of knowledge, constructs 'fictions'--i.e. material reorganizations of signs and images, of relations between what one sees and what one says, between what one does and what one can do" (*Le partage du sensible*). Is this valid for all art, not just that of post-1800?

JR It's art's representative system that has made fiction a central concept. There's no opposition between "imitation" and "invention." Art's representative system is not a system of copies, but of fiction, of "the organization of actions" that Aristotle talks about. It's the concept that liberates art from questions of truth, and from Plato's condemnation of simulacra. On the other hand, the "general bent of the human spirit" separates the idea of "fiction" from that of "the organization of actions" or from history. Fiction becomes a procedure of organizing signs and images, common to factual accounts and to fiction, to "documentary" films and to films that tells a story. But this organization of signs is not "outside the truth." When fiction becomes a "general bent of the human spirit," it is once again under the rule of truth. This is essentially what Flaubert says: if a sentence does not ring true, it's because the idea is false.

SG Although I completely agree with your restrained and well-founded definition of "literature," I feel that as a literary critic, I have been put in a double-bind. On the one hand, your discourse seems to directly solicit the interest of literary critics, by proposing alternate ways to think about their activities, outside the constraints and protocols of the usual reading of literature as a social and learned institution. On the other hand, you tell us that our field of activity as such doesn't interest you. The critical reader realizes that not only has he misunderstood what you meant to say, but that your message is not even addressed to him. Which begs the question of the audience for your texts and your style. Does literature only interest you as an object conceived for and addressed to philosophers?

JR For me, there is no line of demarcation between the questions of philosophers and those of "literary critics." Clearly, I don't recognize a separate domain for literary criticism and its "methods." Literature and investigations into literature belong to everyone. And this investigation [End Page 9] necessarily brings together two kinds of interrogation: those concerning the procedures that enable us to contemplate a specific historical system of the art of writing, and those that analyze the forms themselves of this art. For me, Hegel's theorization of Romanticism and Flaubert's correction of sentences spring from an identical interrogation. And I have spent more time reading writers than philosophers.

SG I'm certainly not questioning this aspect of your work, nor the complex readings of post-1789 texts that you have done. I'm simply wondering if the same thing can be done with pre-1800 texts.

JR I think so. But it's not a matter of more or less attention to the writings of this or that era. "Literature" being the system of the art of writing that no longer acknowledges the rules of that art, its implicit norms must be sought in the detail of the texts. Voltaire compared what Corneille did with what he "should do." He allows us to measure, in one direction or another, the extent of Corneille's departure from a system's norm. And Corneille himself points out and justifies these departures. For Balzac, Flaubert or Mallarmé, "norm" and "departure" are internal to a writing process. Auto-correction has replaced critical adjudication. Our critical methods of close reading are a continuation of this self-editing. Today we read Montaigne or Racine according to modes of attention forged in the Age of Romanticism. Likewise, an art historian of the school of Louis Marin will look at a Titian in a way that is informed by the Impressionists, the Fauves, or by abstract art.

SG It is nonetheless remarkable to see how this position has put you in agreement with the most traditional literary critics, with those who are politically more to the Right-- like Marc Fumaroli, for example--whose impossible dream, shared by many, is to get rid of the literary theory of the last 40 years. Even though your reasons for bringing literary theory to an impasse are different, the effects remain the same. Doesn't this strike you as problematic?

JR I am certainly aware of the wish, here and elsewhere, to make a tabula rasa of the theoretical and practical upheavals of the 1960s, and, for example, to restore a "humanism" in tune with the old art of rhetoric, just as one wants to restore the criteria of taste, and of pleasure, the wisdom of enlightened sovereigns and counselors, etc. But for me, separating the historical systems of writing does not mean putting each person in his place [End Page 10] and time. In any case, the literary system of writing is a system of reappropriation of past works, which blurs any pretension to establish a legitimate method of appreciation and interpretation. But if literary theory pulled the literary object out of its pseudo-obviousness, it then left it indefinitely oscillating between an essentialism that externalizes literature based on undetectable linguistic affiliations (intransitivity) and a historicism that operates an equally undetectable connection between the artistic and the political--based on tautological notions like "modernity" or on confused notions like "critique of representation," which mixes together ten different problems (from parliamentary democracy to non-figurative painting, by way of psychoanalysis, critique of the cogito, religious interdiction of representation, and the unrepresentability of the death camps).

The Politics, Aesthetics, and Logic of Disagreement

SG Let's move on to the question of individual and collective subjectification that you analyze in several texts, in an attempt to understand the relations you establish between literature, aesthetics and politics, all of which you have redefined. In *La mésentente* (1995) you proposed splitting the current notion of the political into "police" and "politics" ["la politique/police" and "la politique/politique"] and you define "police" as a partition of the sensible/perceptible, while "political" would be a means for disrupting this partition, since, according to you, the essence of politics is disagreement. From which

you derive an "aesthetic of the political," or a politics that would be aesthetic in the sense of allowing to be heard or seen what was previously invisible and inaudible, by inscribing a perceptive world into another one, as you described it in your "Postface" to the American edition of *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres* (1998). So my question is this: Does literature belong to this general historical mode of visibility that you call aesthetic, or is it different from it, and how? One has the impression of a kind of conflation of these three terms--politics, aesthetics, literature-- to designate the same operation: an antagonistic partition of the sensible.

JR I use "aesthetic" in two senses--one broad, one more restrained. In the broad sense, I speak of an "aesthetic of the political," to indicate that politics is first of all a battle about perceptible/sensible material. Politics and police are two different modes of visibility concerning the things that a community considers as "to be looked into," and the appropriate subjects to [End Page 11] look into them, to judge and decide about them. In the extreme example that I gave in *La Mésentente*, the patricians do not see that what is coming from the mouths of the plebeians are articulated words speaking of common things, and not growls of hunger and furor. In the restrained sense, "aesthetic" designates for me a specific system of art, opposed to the representative system. The representative system distinguishes, among the different arts (different in the sense of ways of doing), those arts with a common goal--imitation--and from there it defines genres, norms of "fabrication," criteria of appreciation, etc. The aesthetic system distinguishes the artistic domain based on how artistic productions are sensible/perceptible. The aesthetic system transforms this into the manifestations of a specific mode of thought--a thought that has become exterior to itself--in a sensibility that is itself uprooted from the ordinary mode of the sensible/perceptible. The aesthetic system proposes the products of art as equivalents of the intentional and the non-intentional, of the completed and the non-completed, of the conscious and the unconscious (Kant's "aimless finality," Schelling's definition of artistic production as the coming together of a conscious and an unconscious process, etc.) It exempts the products of art from representative norms, but also from the kind of autonomy that the status of imitation had given them. It makes them into both autonomous, self-sufficient realities, and into forms of life. Literature, as a new system of the art of writing, belongs to this aesthetic system of the arts and to its paradoxical mode of autonomy.

SG In what sense do you use the word "writing" [écriture] in the subtitle of your *Chair des mots. Politiques de l'écriture*? For example, how do you distinguish it from "literature," "discourse," and "language"? What are the theories of language--philosophical or otherwise--underlying your use of these words?

JR The idea of writing is not based on a theory of language, but on what I call the partition of the sensible. For Plato, writing defined a certain common space--a circulation of language and thought with neither a legitimate emitter, a specific receptor, nor a regulated mode of transmission. For him, this space of mute language is, by the same token, the space of democracy, and democracy is also the system of written laws and the system where there is no specific title for exercising power. This is a philosophical and political concept, rather than a linguistic one. "Writing" is a modality of the rapport between logos and aisthesis, which, since Plato and Aristotle, has served to conceptualize the political animal. The concepts of writing and of [End Page 12] literarity allow us to con-

sider the political animal as a literary animal, an animal in the grip of letters, inasmuch as letters belong to no one and circulate from all quarters.

SG If one had to distinguish your approach from that of Michel Foucault, with whom you acknowledge certain affinities, would it be this notion of the partition of the sensible, and of the political partition of the common language--in either an egalitarian manner or not--that differentiates you? What exactly would be the subject of your "genealogy"?

JR The idea of the partition of the sensible is no doubt my own way of translating and appropriating for my own account the genealogical thought of Foucault--his way of systematizing how things can be visible, utterable, and capable of being thought. The genealogy of the concept of literature that I have attempted in *La parole muette*, or in my current work on the systems of art, could be expressed in terms close to Foucault's concept of episteme. But at the same time, Foucault's concept claims to establish what is thinkable or not for a particular era. For one thing, I am much more sensitive to crossings-over, repetitions, or anachronisms in historical experience. Second, the historicists' partition between the thinkable and the unthinkable seems to me to cover up the more basic partition concerning the very right to think. So that where Foucault thinks in terms of limits, closure and exclusion, I think in terms of internal division and transgression. *L'Histoire de la folie* was about locking up "madmen" as an external structuring condition of classical reason. In *La nuit des prolétaires*, I was interested in the way workers appropriated a time of writing and thought that they "could not" have. Here we are in a polemical arena rather than an archeological one. And thus it's the question of equality--which for Foucault had no theoretical pertinence--that makes the difference between us.

SG What is common language? What conception--philosophical, linguistic, or otherwise--do you have of language, of words, of discourse, of letters, that allows you to ponder these partitionings, these divisions? And has this conception changed since your work on *La nuit des prolétaires*?

JR The idea of "common language" is more polemical than definitional, more philosophical than linguistic. On the one hand, "common language" is the political refusal of the policing logic of separate idioms. The workers of *La nuit des prolétaires* refused to talk "workmen's talk." They refused to be [End Page 13] assigned a group identity. On the other hand, the reference is methodological. It's a matter of saying that in the long run, philosophers and historians, sociologists and politicians speak, argue and make gestures in the same language.

JHK To put the question in Chomsky's terms, can we say that you are interested in part in literary performances--in the way they are classified and carried out, etc., and at the same time, you seek to conceive a kind of equality of literary competence?

JR On the one hand, I'm interested in literarity as a common potentiality of experience--individual and collective. On the other hand, I'm interested in literature as the specific case of the art of writing within a historical system of art. Obviously these two are linked. But on the one hand, general literary competence has no direct consequences for literature's specific performances. Rather, there is a rapport of tension, of opposition by writers to this system of literarity, which conditions their expression and their reception. Further, I believe it's fruitful to work in two directions at once--toward constituting a paradigm of literature, with its specific political powers, and also in the larger, more indeterminate and transhistorical area of the politics of writing. We must not be in a hurry to link

these two together. We must allow each of these axes to produce its own results. By linking them together too quickly, we fall into the useless categories that I spoke of earlier--modernity, critique of representation, and so on.

JHK Why do Woolf and Joyce represent the "true novels of the democratic period" any more than Zola or Hugo? To elaborate, your work strongly questions the "Platonic" notion of "a style of speaking presumed to belong to the worker status." It seems to want to deconstruct "how philosophy conceptualizes the meaning of an artisan's activity in a way that assigns him a place appropriate to his being; thus social history or sociology connects being a 'good' scientific object with the representation of a link between a way of being and a way of doing or saying that belongs to popular identity" ("Histoire des mots, mots de l'histoire," 88).

You also say that "there are two kinds of community--societies conceived on the organic and functional mode--based on people's identity, on deeds and words--and societies based on the simple equality of speaking people, on the contingency of their coming together (ibid. 98), and that "Clearly there is a genealogy of the kinds of writing produced by the [End Page 14] community. For example, in the Age of Romanticism, realistic writing corresponds to a certain paradigm of the community, and another form of writing corresponds to another idea of the community." Clearly, for you, "the true novels of the democratic era are in fact those that apparently speak of the leisure class and their states of mind, and not those that aim to give an account of great social movements, à la Zola."

Doesn't this verge on reintroducing a new form of Platonic classification of literature (perhaps even of society), and appropriate literary-social correspondences? Something like: the real literature of democracy is that based on heterogeneous voices, not grand social gesture (precisely because it corresponds to the real forms of democracy, based on simple equality of speaking subjects, not organic functional unity). Aren't you back to saying that there are, indeed, forms of literary expression essentially appropriate to specific community (i.e. political) forms? Only, this time, just the inverse of the ones we thought.

Perhaps this relates to the slide from two "paradigms" of community to two "types" of community? That is, if we maintain the distinction between "paradigms" and the communities, can't we say that a democratic community--indeed any community--can appropriately, will inevitably, and must rigorously and conscientiously be thought of either/both in "functional, organic" and "simple equality of contingency" terms, and that therefore, no one type of fictive (or theoretical) discourse is the essentially appropriate one for democracy? Making visible the real relation of a Woolf-Joyce discourse to the democratic epoch does not require denying the relation of a Hugo-Zola discourse. Both are related to the democratic project in some way; neither democracy make. Doesn't respect for the heterogeneity of discourse open us to the possible positive uses of both kinds of discourse for the democratic project rather than the choosing of one over the other?

JR The text to which you refer addressed the literary paradigms of historic discourse and the reasons for the perceptible impoverishment of the discourse of social history. During the Age of Romanticism, there was a large paradigm, represented by Michelet, that analyzed democratic speaking, and was based on reducing the "literary" gap that constituted this kind of speaking. For the rhetoric of the revolutionary orators, Michelet

substituted the "meaning of their words." For him, what is speaking through the words of the revolutionary orators is either the life of generations, the motherhood of nature, or, on the contrary, the gutters of the cities. It is to such natural-mythological powers that Hugo and Zola refer. It is from these that springs [End Page 15] the discourse of social history. I have detected a certain exhaustion of this paradigm. From it, social historians have kept some disincarnate principles of method (recourse to great cycles and to daily details of material life, the interrogation of "silent witnesses"), while forgetting their source. For them, this reduction of literarity is still too "literary." And social historians, being generally oriented to the Left, have a tendency to see in every question of this order an aestheticism that is unworthy of popular struggles and suffering. I have said that in order for historians to renew their access to democratic speaking, they would do well to renew their literary paradigms, and for myself, I wrote *La Nuit des prolétaires* along structural lines that are closer to *The Waves* than to *Les Misérables*. For me, it was an heuristic principle. From the historians' point of view, it was a provocation. But it's not a matter of saying that there would be a truly democratic literature and then another, falsely democratic literature. There is no correspondence, term by term, between novelistic forms and forms of political action. And finally, it is literarity--as a mode of circulation of writing--that belongs to the democratic partition of the sensible, and not some kind of intrigue.

SG You propose "disagreement" [la mésentente] as a way of thinking about political subjectification, distinguishing it from "misrecognition" [la méconnaissance] or "misunderstanding" [le malentendu]. Disagreement as the democratic logic of dissensus, as opposed to consensus. You propose the notion of "warring writings" in order to think about literature and its contradictions. What would constitute "heterogeneous" literary production, similar to what's produced by disagreement in the political arena? Is there a style of subjectification particular to literature, which, of course, would not be a theory of the subject?

JR Literature, like politics, operates processes of subjectification by proposing new ways of isolating and articulating the world. This being so, its subjective inventions are made via a singular mechanism. Literature finds itself between democratic literarity and a metapolitical goal: the goal of a discourse and a knowledge about the community that would speak the truth, underlying or running counter to democratic literarity. The subjects of a perceptible experience invented by literature bear witness to this duality. Thus Flaubert's characters bear witness to both the democratic circulation of letters and a bodily and passive mode of perception that challenges this, moving from the human scale to a sub-atomic one. [End Page 16]

SG Did I understand you rightly, in your talk at the University of Connecticut, when you affirmed that the antagonistic subjectification of the partition of the sensible--like the unconscious in social texts, or like the aesthetic--originates in literature?

JR At that point I was not talking about an origin of the political in general. I was talking about literature, in the sense that I understand it, as a historical system of the art of writing. I said that for me, the question of the political in literature must extend to the heart of this antagonistic partition of the sensible that constitutes the political. And, in this context, I analyzed the politics--or metapolitics--specific to literature. That is, the reconfiguration of the political and the historical performed by literature in the Age of Romanti-

cism, when it countered historians' history and tribunal debates with a dive into the hidden depths of society and its coded messages--from Balzac's marketplace to Hugo's sewer system, and when it published a language and a rhythm appropriate to the community, in the style of Rimbaud.

Aesthetics, Politics, and Democracy

SG You write that "... democracy is not simply a form of government, nor a kind of social life, in the style of de Tocqueville. Democracy is a specific mode of symbolic structuring of the individual living in common." Would therefore every social or political movement be first of all a will toward aesthetic appropriation--an appropriation of the other's language--just as every aesthetic practice would always be political?

JR I think that the aesthetic dimension of the reconfiguration of the relationships between doing, seeing and saying that circumscribe the being-in-common is inherent to every political or social movement. But this aesthetic component of politics does not lead me to seek the political everywhere that there is a reconfiguration of perceptible attributes in general. I am far from believing that "everything is political." On the other hand, I believe it's important to note that the political dimension of the arts can be seen first of all in the way that their forms materially propose the paradigms of the community. Books, theater, orchestra, choirs, dance, paintings or murals are modes for framing a community. And the terms of the alliance that a certain number of artists or artistic currents have made with revolutionary politics [End Page 17] are first of all formed on their own ground: in the invention of theater as an autonomous art, the redefinition of the medium of painting, the redistribution of the relationships between pure art and decorative art, etc.

SG The idea of literary "incarnation" appears in your work beginning in the 1990s, in the various literary studies that you later collected under the title *La chair des mots*. How did this paradigm come to you, and how do you justify using it to consider the literature of the nineteenth century?

JR I believe this came to me through the chance reading of Balzac's *Le curé du village*. This novel fictionalizes in a quasi-Surrealist way Plato's fable of the perversity of writing. In contrast to novel-reading, which leads two pure, popular souls into crime, Balzac presents a redemptive writing carved into the very ground of reality--the canals that the heroine causes to be dug in order to redeem her sins and bring irrigation and fortune to her village. This fable is close to Saint-Simon's great utopian theme--railroads and canals as true means of human communication, as opposed to democratic babbling. For me, this revived the question of the partition of the sensible, which was at the heart of the workers' emancipation. But it also gave a romantic version of the great theme of St. Paul: incarnate language vs. dead letters. From that point, I was led to rethink the relationship between the status of novelistic fiction and the paradigm of incarnate language, notably based on a counter-reading of the episode of Peter's denial, which plays a key role in Auerbach's analysis of the gospels' accounts and novelistic realism, in *Mimesis*. Literary disembodiment struck me as the very heart of the novelistic tradition and of the "dangers of novel-reading" superficially identified with damaging effects of the imagination. I then sought to show how literature as constituted in the nineteenth century was involved in a great gap between democratic literature and its opposite--the idea of a "true writing," a new version of incarnate language. Consider, for example, Balzac's or

Michelet's notion of a language of mute of things, Mallarmé's "direct writing" of the Idea on the page, Rimbaud's language accessible to every meaning, Proust's book written within us, and so on.

SG To the extent that for you, democracy is not embodied and the political collective is not an organism, you consider political subjectification as "literary disembodiment." How do your ideas differ from the conception of democratic invention by someone like Claude Lefort? [End Page 18]

JR Lefort considers democracy as a modern invention, based on the schemata of the double body of the king and his revolutionary disembodiment. This schemata links the duality intrinsic to the concept of "the people" to the duality of the king's body, and makes democracy spring from a kind of original, symbolic murder. So that for him, democracy springs from an imaginary reinvesting of a ravaged common body, and is shadowed by totalitarian terror. Thus democratic duality is linked to the drama of an original sacrifice. And all "theological-political" thought centers on this Freudian theme of patricide, on Lacanian exclusion, on the Kantian sublime, on the Ten Commandments' interdiction of representation, etc. in order to definitively impose a pathological vision of the political, wherein two centuries of history are read as a single catastrophe linked to this original murder. I wanted to show that democratic people were totally independent from this drama. Which is why I used the Greek term *demos*, which carries no ghosts of sacrificed kings (this could be the meaning of the end of Oedipus at Colonus: the pure and simple disappearance of the dead king, the elimination of the drama of sacrifice). The *demos* is not the glorious, imaginary body that is heir to the sacrificed royal body. It's not the body of the people. It's the abstract assemblage of "ordinary people," who have no individual title to govern. It is the pure addition of "chance" that comes to revoke all ideas of legitimate domination, all notions of personal "virtue" destining a special category of people to govern. Democracy is the paradoxical government of those who do not embody any title for governing the community. So the double body of the people is the difference that separates a political subject from any empirical part of the social body.

JHK All right, democracy is government by ordinary people. But how is the abstract idea of *demos* translated concretely in today's world?

JR There is no constant body of the *demos* that would support democratic pronouncements. The democratic principle is the basis for what can be called occurrences of political subjectification. The principle of *demos* is translated by the activities of those who make pronouncements and demonstrations, affirming a power denied to words and judgment. It is from *demos* that those who have no business speaking, speak, and those who have no business taking part, take part. These subjects give themselves collective names (the people, citizens, the proletariat, German Jews, and so on) and impose a reconfiguration of the sensible by making visible what was not visible, beginning with themselves as subjects capable of speaking about common ground. [End Page 19]

SG For example, there was some *demos* at work in the strikes and demonstrations of November-December 1995 in Paris?

JR The question of *demos* was certainly at play, very emblematically, in that transformation of subway workers into demonstrators occupying the pedestrians' space. The economic question of retirement benefits immediately became, in an exemplary manner, "Who is qualified to oversee the interests of the community, to connect its present to its

future?" According to a purely Jacotot-style logic, the movement was only strengthened when Prime Minister Juppé played the school master, lecturing these "backward" people grasping at old "rigid ideas of salary" and "short-term, personal interests," enlightening them on the laws of the global economy and on wise government, as the "responsible" director of their common future. A good part of the intelligentsia--including the Marxist-trained intelligentsia--supported the "courageous" move of the Prime Minister, in the name of the struggle against "populism." But the strikers replied, "Don't waste your breath, we understand perfectly well. And because we understand, we want nothing to do with your reform." What they had understood, first of all, was the logic of the explanation whose function was to divide the world into those who understand and those who don't. It was the question of equality underlying the "economic" question. This said, there are degrees of subjectification. Movements like those 1995 strikes put elements of subjectification into play, without, however, arousing political subjects in the full sense--subjects capable of tracing a connection between all instances of subjectification and attaching them to the great signifiers of collective life.

JHK This implies a constant reformulation and reconfiguration of the demos according to context. Thus it's by analyzing these instances that one locates the political. So why attach so much value to the demos? What does it contribute, politically? Anyone can call themselves the demos.

JR I seem to detect, behind your question, the shadow of oppositions between spontaneity and organization, between populism and scientific theory. For me, it is not a matter of valorizing the demos as the good face of the collective. It's a matter of reflecting, first of all, on the question, "What makes the political exist?" It's a matter of problematizing the deceptively simple idea of a subject who, as Aristotle put it, "participates both in governing and in being governed." It's a matter of reflecting on the [End Page 20] singularity of this gap in relation to the "normal" order of things, where the agent of an action is not also its recipient. When Plato, in the *Laws*, examines the natural entitlement to command and the corresponding entitlement to be commanded, he discovers the logical scandal he calls "the role of the gods"--that is, the effects of chance--"government" that knows no principle for the symmetrical division of roles. It is this logical scandal, smothered beneath banal pronouncements on popular rule or on the reciprocity of citizens' rights and duties, that the word *demos* summarizes--the singularity of the political in relation to the "natural" logic of domination. "Valorizing the demos" does not mean giving a prize to every sign-wielding demonstrator; rather, it means foregrounding the paradox of "the competence of incompetents" that is the basis of politics in general. It means saying that "the analysis of instances" is not univocal. Politics is the very dispute over the instances and their various elements. Today the denunciation of "populism" seals the accord between old Marxists and young liberals.

The Aesthetic Idea and Artistic Forms

SG I'm interested by the opposition that you develop--based on Foucault's reprise of Kant--between "aesthetic" and artistic form. According to you, aesthetic form can only be seen as a form if it is a "form" of nothing, and if it does not realize any concept or imitate any object. Thus it cannot be "produced" by artistic labor. So that only genius, as a subjective faculty, can produce an aesthetic idea--itself an equivocal concept. What exactly is an "aesthetic idea," your current research theme at the Collège de Philosophie?

JR This opposition between two ideas of form is the opposition between two systems of art. Representative logic was linked to the opposition between form and matter and to the idea of art as the imposition of form to matter. Kant's Critique of Judgment juxtaposes this traditional logic of art as *tekhne* to a completely new logic: that of the "free form," which is not the form of anything, which is not the effectuation of any concept, but rather is the pure correlative of a gaze that suspends all relations of knowledge or interest in an object. For Kant, the aesthetic idea is the supplement to the concept, that aura of associated and indistinct representations that allows the consciously elaborated artistic form to transform itself into a widely appreciated aesthetic form. For him, the aesthetic idea belongs in the direct line of the famous "je ne sais quoi" that haunted the Age of Classicism and that makes genius the standard attribute of the supplement. But the concept of genius also translates [End Page 21] that poetical upheaval inaugurated by Vico, in identifying Homer's poetic genius not as a capacity for invention, but on the contrary, as an inability to master the language, the poet's unawareness of what he is doing. In the aesthetic age, the aesthetic idea becomes more profoundly the idea of art, of an identity between an artistic process produced solely by unregulated artistic will, and a mode of existence of art objects as "free" objects, not the projects of will. This global idea of art defines aesthetic ideas, inventions of equivalence between fact and non-fact, between the book already written within us and the book in which everything is invented for the ends of a demonstration (Proust), between the unmediated eye of the camera and the combinatory power of montage, and so on.

SG Which brings us to "enthusiasm," as the power that effects the transformation of artistic ingenium into forms. You have said that the old term "enthusiasm" should be called "unconscious," in the Kantian sense, where "genius is ignorance of what one is doing or what nature is doing through one." Which brings us back to the question of the "spirit" [*l'esprit*] of form and the individualized face of the incarnation of the spirit, as you describe in Mallarmé. *La politique de la sirène*, I believe. Can every writer or artist from every period be thought of in these terms, since "There is no form without the spirit of form, nor without a struggle against this form"?

JR It's not a question of era, but of the system of art. The area of form and its spirit belongs to the aesthetic system of the arts. Opposing the form/idea of the representative system, we have the doublet of form as free form, pure appearance relying on itself (Flaubert's "book on nothing") and form as the form of a process, the manifestation of a history of forms, and so on. The "spirit of form" is the give-and-take between these two poles, between autonomy and heteronomy. I have attempted to show this give-and-take as opposed to "formalist" discourse, which creates a fiction of the conquest of pure form, freed of representative content and of any obligations exterior to art. From this point of view, Mallarmé is emblematic. His poems are often presented as pure auto-affirmations of language. But Mallarmé, in giving them the movement of a fan, of cascading hair, of a garland or a constellation, makes them more than aesthetic delights. He makes them forms of life, artifices participating in a political-religious consecration of human experience. [End Page 22]

SG For you, the aesthetic is not the theory or philosophy of the Beautiful, but the area for elaborating "the idea of unconscious thought, or again, a problematic of the political community that is not limited to an 'aesthetization' of the political" ("*La forme et son es-*

prît"). So would the aesthetic idea be the idea of unconscious thought? And "unconscious" in what sense?

JR The key idea of the aesthetic as an historical system specific to contemplating art is the identity between the voluntary and the involuntary--Vico's poetic revolution in declaring Homer a poet not by virtue of his inventiveness but by the evidence he gives of a state of infancy vis-à-vis language; Kant's aimless finality; Schiller's "aesthetic state" that suspends the usual subordination of passive sensation to active understanding; Flaubert's or Proust's project of a completely calculated book that would be identical to a book that would write itself; the impressive gripping of sensation itself, the unconscious revelations of music in Schopenhauer, Wagner, Nietzsche, and so on. Hegel's Aesthetics was the great systematization of art as thought outside of itself. And from there literature assigned itself a double task--the linguistic and geological one of isolating layers of writing, while reading hieroglyphics or fossils expressing the layers of history (à la Balzac), and the task of linking thoughts, sentiments and "typical" characters to primal elements, in themselves insignificant, of their constitution (à la Flaubert). This is not the Freudian unconscious, but it prepares the way for it to become thinkable.

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Note

1. Elsewhere, Rancière has defined the "partition of the sensible" as "that system of sensible evidences that reveals both the existence of a communality and the divisions that define in it respectively assigned places and parts" ("Interview," in *Le partage du sensible*; cited in "Cinematographic Image, Democracy, and the 'Splendor of the Insignificant,' an Interview with Jacques Rancière" by Solange Guénoun, translated by Alyson Waters (Sites, Fall 2000).

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