

¿Articular la democracia? Un recorrido por la filosofía de la literatura de Jacques Rancière y un desacuerdo

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Resumen:

La obra de Jacques Rancière está fundamentada de manera radical en la creencia en una inteligencia original compartida por todos los seres humanos por igual. Por tanto, la tarea del filósofo político consiste en proponer una ruptura de la distribución de las posiciones comúnmente aceptada —lo que Rancière llama el trabajo de «la policía». La policía garantiza que las posiciones y las clases queden claramente diferenciadas; la política, en cambio, cuestiona esta categorización. Pero cuando la policía «distribuye lugares y funciones», se instituye a sí misma del mismo modo también como «un orden de lo visible y de lo decible, que estipula que una actividad sea visible y otra no lo sea». De esta forma Rancière relaciona «democracia» y estética. La escritura modernista articula el principio «democrático» en el corazón del nuevo régimen «estético» del arte.

Mi desacuerdo procede de los ejemplos que utiliza Rancière para ilustrar sus tesis: Flaubert, Proust, Mallarmé son nombres muy «consensuales», tan consensuales de hecho que mantienen una jerarquía entre *formas* de literatura que recuerda a una distribución entre arte y no-arte. Y dado que Rancière considera las noticias como el «síntoma» por excelencia de nuestra modernidad y el objeto privilegiado del arte moderno, sugiero que la prensa sensacionalista, o la novela detectivesca, podrían haber apoyado sus teorías de manera más convincente. Sorprendentemente, Rancière, buen conocedor de la literatura inglesa del XIX, no toma en cuenta la contribución decisiva de Inglaterra a las nuevas formas de la cultura popular.

Palabras clave:

Rancière, Modernismo, Literatura popular, Novela detectivesca, Literatura sensacionalista.

Articulating Democracy?

A Review of Jacques Rancière's Philosophy of Literature – and a Disagreement

Abstract:

Jacques Rancière's work is thoroughly subtended by a belief in an original, equally shared intelligence between all human beings. It is therefore the duty of the political philosopher to propose a rupture of the accepted distribution of positions – of what Rancière calls the work of 'the police.' The police makes sure that positions and classes remain clearly differentiated; politics, on the contrary, challenges such categorization. But when the police 'distributes places and functions', it also by the same token institutes itself as 'an order of the visible and the sayable, which stipulates that an activity is visible and another is not.' This is how Rancière relates 'democracy' to aesthetics. Modernist writing articulates the 'democratic' principle lying at the heart of the new 'aesthetic' regime of art.

My disagreement stems from Rancière's choice of illustrations for his theses: Flaubert, Proust, Mallarmé are extremely 'consensual' names, so consensual in fact that they maintain a hierarchy between *forms* of literature, strongly reminiscent of a partitioning between art and non-art. And since Rancière sees the news item as the very 'symptom' of our modernity and the privileged object of modern art, I suggest that the sensational press, or the detective novel, could have supported his views more convincingly. A fine connoisseur of 19th-century English literature, Rancière turns a surprisingly blind eye to the distinct contribution of Britain to the new forms of popular culture.

Key words :

Rancière, Modernism, Popular Literature, Detective novel, Sensational literature.

1. PHILOSOPHY, POLITICS AND POLICE

Rancière's work is thoroughly subtended by a belief in an original, equally shared intelligence between all human beings. This fundamental assumption already

supported his first book, a critique of his mentor Louis Althusser, *Althusser's Lesson* (1974),¹ and was made even more explicit in his next book, *The Night of Labour* (1981), before it became the very center of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), a book presented in the form of a

tribute to Joseph Jacotot, a French educational philosopher of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, who had developed a method of ‘*intellectual emancipation*.’² Drawing on Jacotot’s theories –which he does not hesitate to rewrite to serve his own purposes³–, Rancière argues that true emancipation is ‘the act of an intelligence which only obeys itself’ (26⁴) – *itself*, that is to say: not the intelligence of a master thinker. *Everyone* can think; it is just the education system that produces differentiation between master and pupil, the ‘stultification’ (*abrutissement*) of the masses (33), and the alleged inequality between the average people and an intellectual elite (27). Even Marxian concepts such as the ‘proletariat’ are systematically exposed as being part of an unconscious strategy of power, seeking to perpetuate a relationship of differentiation between those who think and those who labour. Real working-class discourse, Rancière argues, is on the contrary a form of discourse which eludes differentiation, or categorization.

This is a notion centrally dealt with in a collection of three essays written between 1986 and 1988, and brought together in book-form under the title of *On the Shores of Politics* (1990).⁵ Rancière claims that it is in the very nature of true equality to precipitate what he calls *une déclassification* (51), a word to be understood in its literal sense of an abolition of all classes, but which might also be understood to mean a more general process of ‘decategorization’. Rancière’s main concern is indeed to overturn all imposed forms of categorization, i.e. all stable differentiation of one category of person, or experience, from another. True equality only occurs when workers are not distinguished from intellectuals, masters from disciples, men from women, whites from blacks, true literature from popular fiction, art from non-art.

This is precisely what the *political* philosopher’s task, as it is defined in *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983), consists in.⁶ Rancière suggests a new mode of dealing with the poor, one that according to him would be the very opposite of the Platonic view, which allots to each type of person one, *and only one*, task – labour, war, or thought. To Rancière’s eyes, modern philosophers too have been anxious to distinguish people capable of genuine thought from others, an otherness entirely defined by its economic occupation and therefore presumed to lack the intellectual

ability required for thought. It is in this sense that Rancière claims philosophy must become *political*: it is indeed the duty of politics to propose a rupture of the accepted distribution of positions –what in ‘Thesis 6’ and ‘Thesis 7’ of *On the Shores of Politics* is called the work of ‘the police’ (167)–, to contest the accepted partition of the world between the ones who exercise power and the ones who subject to it. What the police does, in other words, politics must undo. The police makes sure that positions and classes remain clearly differentiated; politics, on the contrary, challenges such categorization. And philosophers will therefore remain complicit with the police as long as they do not turn political.

2. A NEW AESTHETIC REGIME

Such views are summed up in the famous ‘Ten thesis on politics’ closing *On the Shores of Politics*, where Rancière also introduced an idea that he would be keen to develop in the following years: politics not only challenges the established social order; it is also a contestation of the accepted ‘partition of the sensible’.⁷ This idea was developed notably in *Disagreement* (1995), very often considered in France to be Rancière’s major work.⁸ Rancière explains that when the police ‘distributes places and functions’, it also by the same token institutes itself as ‘an order of the visible and the sayable, which stipulates that an activity is visible and another is not, that an utterance is heard as discourse and another as noise’ (52). Politics is thus what also introduces a rupture in this ‘configuration of the sensible’, i.e. in the distribution of the visible and the audible. It says the as yet unsayable, displays the as yet invisible. It ‘refigures’ the space where absences and presences manifest themselves (53). What becomes clear then, is that what is disrupted by political disagreement is not only the power arrangements of the policed social order, but more deeply *the perceptual and epistemic underpinnings* of that order. What Rancière calls ‘dissensus’ is not merely a disagreement about the justice of particular social arrangements, it is also a disagreement about the partition, or distribution, of ‘the sensible’. That is profoundly why politics and aesthetics cannot be dissociated, an assumption made particularly explicit in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (2000),⁹ where Rancière uses the term aesthetics not to refer to theories or practices of

² RANCIÈRE, J., *La Nuit des prolétaires*, Paris, 1981 (translated by John Drury, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, Philadelphia, 1991); *Le Maître ignorant*, Paris, 1987 (translated by Kristin Ross, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford, 1991).

³ See CITTON, Y., «The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Knowledge and Authority. Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts», *Acumen*, 2010, pp. 25-37.

⁴ Here and throughout, all translations are mine, based on the original French edition, to which page numbers therefore always refer.

⁵ RANCIÈRE, J., *Aux bords du politique* (1990), 2nd edition, Paris, 1998 (translated by Liz Heron, *On the Shores of Politics*, London, 1995).

⁶ RANCIÈRE, J., *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres*, Paris, 1983 (translated by A. Parker, C. Oster and J. Drury, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, Philadelphia, 1991).

⁷ RANCIÈRE, J., «Thesis 7, in Dix Thèses sur la Politique», *Aux bords du politique*, 1998, p. 179 (translated by Rachel Bowlby and David Panagia, «Ten Theses on Politics» [<http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/humnet/cmcs/Ranciere.html>], accessed 4 March 2016).

⁸ RANCIÈRE, J., *La Mésentente: politique et philosophie*, Paris, 1995 (translated by Julie Rose, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Minneapolis, 1998).

⁹ RANCIÈRE, J., *Le Partage du sensible. Esthétique et politique*, Paris, 2000 (translated by Gabriel Rockhill, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, New York, 2004).

art, but to ‘the aesthetic regime of art,’ i.e. to a *historical moment*: the moment when art came to be identified as a specific field of experience (28-31). This new regime, which imposed itself at the end of the 18th century and throughout the 19th, rests on the idea that art is that particular human production that is open for new restructurings, through what Steven Corcoran astutely names ‘the free play of aestheticization’,¹⁰ a free play based notably, according to Rancière, on the equal aesthetic worthiness of all subjects, activities, and objects.

Although Rancière finds illustration for such theses in various forms of art, writing it is –modern writing – that appears to be given preeminence, Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1857) being a favourite reference of Rancière’s throughout his work. It seems indeed that in Rancière’s system, writing is indeed the art that *par excellence* does not translate properties or transmit knowledge; nor is it concerned with a representation of a certain class. Balzac’s writing, for example, seeks to propose a new reading, a new hermeneutics of the world, by lending significance to *les choses muettes*, mute things – such as places, clothes, faces, interiors, etc.¹¹ In modern writing, everything is made to talk. Modern literature articulates ‘mute speech’, the opaque density of silent, muted things. Writing is thus defined as the privileged way of (re)configuring the domain of the sensible, since it allows the invisible and unsayable to gain visibility and sayability, while inventing characters, such as Emma Bovary, that do not fit the roles expected of the representatives of definite classes and categories, characters whom Rancière sees not as classic subjects, but as ‘intervals’ and ‘quasi identities’, or ‘misnomers’ (*Aux bords du politique*, 89).

Modern, democratic subjectivity refuses identification – it is founded on ‘an impossible identification’ (90-91) – and this is precisely what modern writing (Balzac, Flaubert, Tolstoï, Proust) grasps and gives form to. ‘*Je suis Madame Bovary*’, ‘*Madame Bovary soy yo*’. One is always oneself *and* another, we are this or that *and* we are *not* this or that: it is such a ‘paratactic logic’ that famous political slogans also seek to articulate – ‘we are the wretched of the earth’, ‘*nous sommes tous des juifs allemands*’, ‘*Yo soy Charlie*’–, to be opposed to the ‘syllogistic logic’ of the either/or imposed by the police, who always demand that people should be clearly identified, places firmly allotted (89). Modern literature expresses this alternative: rejecting the growing power of the police, it conceives of itself as ‘an experience of dislocation’ (*une expérience de l’inhabiter*), as Kafka well knew (144). There can therefore be no ‘consensual’ writing – writing as peaceful discussion and reasonable

agreement. Literature invites ‘multiplicity’, ‘suspension’, ‘impropriety’ – it is an experience of ‘dissensual’ subjectification (142-143), the name of that which introduces *un écart*, a gap, between the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the utterance, a gap between ‘I’ and ‘I’, a gap which in fiction takes the form of a ‘he’ or of a ‘she’ (*Aux bords du politique*, 194).

3. DEMOCRACY AND MODERNIST LITERATURE

We are beginning to understand how Rancière’s philosophy relates ‘democracy’ to aesthetics. Democrats turn themselves into discursive beings, *des êtres de parole*, that is to say also ‘poetic beings,’ who speak in the name of others, fictionalize themselves as others, thus transgressing the laws of the police – the white middle class defending the rights of black slaves, men demanding the vote for women, etc. ‘The democratic experience is also that of an aesthetics of politics’ (*Aux bords du politique*, 70). *The Lost Thread* (2014) is entirely dedicated to the egalitarian and democratic impulses of modernist literature through a reading of Flaubert, Baudelaire, Conrad, Woolf and Keats.¹² Modernist literature, Rancière argues, constructs a ‘floating world’ in which dreams, drugs, criminals and prostitutes are made into figures of errancy and ‘disintegration’ (103-107). Such figures, he explains, are used to deregulate all representations of places and positions, and should not therefore be confused with representatives of the working class, and of its alleged authenticity and purity.

At the end of his study of *To the Lighthouse*, Rancière introduces a surprising comparison. He opposes two types of journalism, the type of reportage he calls ‘the major Aristotelian art’ of the 20th century, and the kind of modernist reportage invented by American writer James Agee with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), an account of his life among the poor during the Great Depression, illustrated by the photographs of Walker Evans. According to Rancière, Agee was the first journalist to break away from ‘consensual’ reportage literature, by which he means an authorized account of the poor, an account secretly meant to confirm what the poor are supposed to be like (71-72). In such a conception of reportage, journalism is ‘undemocratic’, Rancière claims –undemocratic precisely because it is consensual. On the contrary, Agee’s writing, like Woolf’s –hence the comparison–, consists in clearing a space for the emergence of unauthorized combinations, which thus create new political forces, made up for example by fractions of the middle-class, workers, journalists, poets, and civil servants, who, according to Rancière, will use and reappropriate literary forms to give expression to the

¹⁰ CORCORAN, S. (ed. and transl.), Preface to Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, London, 2010, p. 17.

¹¹ RANCIÈRE, J., *Politique de la littérature*, Paris, 2007, p. 31 (translated by Julie Rose, *The Politics of Literature*, London, 2011).

¹² RANCIÈRE, J., *Le Fil perdu. Essais sur la fiction moderne*, Paris, 2014 (translated by Neil Corcoran, *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction*, London, 2016).

voice of a collective agency that is never homogeneous, but on the contrary always heterogeneous and transitory.

This is what Flaubert's art always manages to do through the character of Emma Bovary: Flaubert's writing, his style, the very succession of his sentences, seek to bring forth a process of 'disidentification' (32), which is achieved by exploding the rigid partitionings that normally forbid a young, uneducated, provincial woman to experience the beauty of passion through a multiplicity of apparently disconnected incidents and details (33-36). This is what modernist impersonality is all about, Rancière suggests: it gives central stage presence not to action, but to vision, a 'paratactic' vision of the material world which is not specific of any class, but on the contrary guarantees 'the equality of all the beings, things and situations' that are caught up in this field of material vision (23). There should therefore exist no antagonism, to Rancière's eyes, between Mallarmé's 'modernist' poetry and the 'realism' of 19th-century novel-writing: both contest the primacy of the narrative over the descriptive; both challenge the hierarchy of subjects and topics; both, finally, 'choose a fragmented [...] mode of focalisation, which ensures that the rough presence of the real (*la présence brute*) prevails over the rational cause-to-effect developments of the story (*les enchaînements rationnels de l'histoire*)' (34-35). Rancière's view is thus a breakaway from orthodox conceptions of modernism, which according to him always strive to restore a strict barrier between art and non-art, the non-representational and the representational, the impersonal and the personal. Such views are condemned as a form of complicity in the perpetual attempt to restore traditional hierarchies, to return things to their officially authorized places.

What in France was considered to be Rancière's *magnus opus* on aesthetics was a thick volume of collected essays dealing with all forms of artistic production (pantomime, dance, cinema, sculpture, photography, writing, etc.), simply entitled *Aisthesis* (2011).¹³ The guiding principle running through such a diversity of 'scenes', as he calls them, is that artistic production is always an indication of profound mutations in modes of perception. A work of art always expresses a reconfiguration of existence. And a dramatic mutation of modes of perception, started to establish itself towards the end of the 18th century to gain full momentum one century later. What a novel like Stendhal's *Red and Black* (*Le Rouge et le noir*, 1831) expresses is not only the historical truth of a political and social mutation in post-revolutionary France (64-65); it is first and foremost, Rancière asserts, the idea that noble emotions and thoughts may be equally shared, by all fractions of the population (67). When the hero Julien Sorel,

the poor son of a village carpenter, enjoys the pleasure of *far niente*, his character figures forth 'the abolition of a hierarchy of occupations' (68). True happiness may at long last be shared when all characters, irrespective of their social origins, pull out of 'the logic of means and ends', the logic of 'calculus', as Rancière also puts it (67), to enjoy the meaninglessness of life and expose by the same token the vanity of all the plots that structure society (70). Balzac's and Zola's narratives express the same conviction, namely that the realist novel is less a representation of the ways of the modern capitalist world, than 'a hymn to life stubbornly pursuing its own nonsense' (75).

In the final chapter of *Aisthesis*, Rancière decides to deal frontally with Agee's reportage ('L'éclat cruel de ce qui est est', 287-307), an essay we understand to have been written therefore while he was already thinking of *The Lost Thread*. Rancière here explains that by focusing on 'the refuse of refined culture' (305), the American writer placed 'kitsch culture', the culture of the poor, the culture of popular art and literature, at the antipodes of the kind of 'modernist avant-garde' promoted by Clement Greenberg.¹⁴ To Rancière's eyes, kitsch culture is not simply what the cultural elite refuses to see and therefore throws away into the poor's homes; it is paradoxically the true embodiment of modernism, which, according to him, was not destined historically to cater to the needs of a new intellectual and social elite—those who could afford to buy the paintings exhibited at the newly-constructed MOMA—but to articulate a new cultural democracy, energized by the idea of 'an art capable both of embracing the accelerated rhythms of industry, society and urban life, and of lending an infinite resonance to the most trivial minutes of everyday life' (307).

4. A DISAGREEMENT

That is where I would beg to introduce my own disagreement with Rancière's theories. Peter Hallward has already raised the question of the validity of Rancière's political positioning, based as it is on a celebration of the 'interval' and the 'being-between', wondering whether such an 'indecisive concept of democracy' is not one in the end that 'fits rather too comfortably within the parameters of the status quo.'¹⁵ My own concern is less openly political, more centered on Rancière's interpretation of culture, but my disagreement points to a similar ambivalence.

By 'disagreement,' I mean certainly not a fierce objection, a violent conflict – I am indeed thoroughly convinced by Rancière's theories –, but what Rancière himself calls *une mésentente* (quite literally in French, a 'mishearing'). I find myself caught in an embarrassing pragmatic situation of interlocution, where the same word

¹³ RANCIÈRE, J., *Aisthesis: scènes du régime esthétique de l'art*, Paris, 2011 (translated by Zakir Paul, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, London and New York, 2013).

¹⁴ GREENBERG, C., «Avant-Garde and Kitsch», *Partisan Review*, Vol. VI, n.º. 5 (1939), pp. 34-49.

¹⁵ HALLWARD, P., «Jacques Rancière and the Subversion of Mastery», *Paraglyph*, vol. 28, n.º. 1 (Summer 2005), pp. 42-43.

will not carry the same meaning for, or will be heard differently by, the locutors (*La Mésestante*, 12). Interlocutors will hear and not hear the same things, disagreeing on the object of the discussion as well as on the quality of those who make it an object of discussion (13, 15). My disagreement is thus ultimately a way of placing Rancière in front of what I think is the major contradiction lying at the heart of his project. For what he calls ‘*la littérature*,’ as the subtitle of *Mute Speech* (2011) – ‘*Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature*’¹⁶ – makes it disturbingly clear, will often boil down to some sort of Holy Trinity composed of Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Proust. It is not only a question of aesthetic affinities; my objection is also to a certain extent ‘political.’ Such choices appear to me to be extremely ‘consensual,’ so consensual in fact that they maintain a hierarchy between *forms* of literature. A partitioning between art and non-art.

At the heart of the matter, it seems to me, is Rancière’s conception of ‘popular culture.’ We do not indeed hear the same things when we use the same words. Hence, without doubt, my puzzled reaction to the unusual, though thought-provoking, comparison between Woolf and Agee. The point here, is that Rancière’s references to the art of the poor, to ‘kitsch’ culture, to the refuse of elite artistic productions, invite us to return to Woolf, but never seem to include what mass culture seems to derive pleasure from, such as the sensational press, or the detective novel. And I think that Rancière, obviously an astute *connaissanceur* of English literature – Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hazlitt, Woolf, Joyce seem to be permanent landmarks – scants the substantial English contribution to this streak of culture. The closest to a real ‘democratic’ literature he ever comes to, in the French tradition, is Zola’s novels, scantily quoted from as a matter of fact. The one reference to Anglo-Saxon literature that could be incontestably placed on the shelves of ‘popular culture,’ will be *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by an American writer. But even so, I very much doubt that Zola’s books have become bed-table companions for the masses, and I also strongly suspect that Agee’s reportage is more likely to appear as a coffee-table book in the drawing rooms of the Parisian intellectual elite, than on the kitchen tables of the working class. Whenever Rancière needs to support his views with precise examples from ‘democratic’ literature, he comes up with names, such as Proust, Conrad, Flaubert, Woolf, Rilke, Maeterlinck or Mallarmé – hardly staple commodities of popular culture.

Should not Rancière’s examples be ‘dissensual,’ instead of being ‘consensual’? Would it not be a truly ‘political’ choice to suggest a vision of culture that would reconcile art and non-art, high art and low art? This is of course what Rancière will argue he does, but as a matter of fact his perspective is entirely determined by the prevalence

of a certain elitist canon. And it is this *canon* that is required to be read through a ‘democratic’ lens; it is not popular culture that is invited into the canon to *challenge* it, and allow us, at long last, to see the invisible, hear the unsayable. In other words, Rancière writes as if the Frankfurt School had never existed, as if Kracauer and Benjamin, for example, had not established the central importance in contemporary culture of new art forms, such as the detective novel, as early as the 1920s.

An excellent example of this sleight of hands is provided, it seems to me, by Rancière’s use of the notion of *faits divers*, a French phrase referring to the sordid incidents made into news items, and sometimes into news events. If the *fait divers* exemplifies an isolated act that is potentially the bearer of the profound meaning of the whole, as Rancière sees it, and is as such the very ‘symptom’ of our modernity, the very emblem of the reconfiguration of narratives and interpretation in the aesthetic regime of art (*Le Fil perdu*, 124), then why illustrate the point with the examples of Victor Hugo’s *Ruy Blas* (1838) and Georg Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* (1835)?

Why insist that Julien Sorel’s story in *Red and Black* was inspired to Stendhal by two *faits divers*, two criminal cases, that the novelist had read about in the *Gazette des Tribunaux*, if it is to stress almost in the same gesture that Stendhal was interested less in the fall and paradoxical celebrity of the ambitious plebeian, than on the latter’s enjoyment of ‘the pure present’ (*Aisthesis*, 66)? Is the aestheticization of Julien’s death really all that matters? Is this aestheticization what still makes Stendhal’s novel worth being read, and, perhaps even more interestingly, what lends it to being adapted as a ‘pop rock musical,’ coming soon (September 2016) in Paris? Rancière’s argues that ‘popular theatre’ was invented when the people themselves were granted the dignity of embodying Life (118), defined no longer as an organic whole, but as a random succession of ‘thinking events’ and of *faits divers*, news items. In the 1830s, the Parisians were out on the streets, and that is precisely what according to him both Hugo and Büchner sought to dramatize (124). My contention here, is that such a particular ‘conjunction of thought, speech and action’ (117) might have been far better illustrated with the type of truly popular literature that was centrally concerned with the growing, nagging question of *faits divers*, and which, in the second half of the 19th century, in England, took, simultaneously, three different, though ultimately converging, directions: sensational novels, detective fiction, and investigative journalism. Those were the forms that deeply reconfigured the modes of apprehension of the real in England, the new ‘modalities of the sensible,’ the narratives that became best-sellers, but also those that literally changed the world, for example by urging Parliament

¹⁶ RANCIÈRE, J., *La Parole muette. Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature*, Paris, 2011 (translated by James Swenson, *Mute Speech. Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, New York, 2011).

to pass new laws for the protection of the poor and defenceless – exploited industrial workers, dispossessed women, abused children.

I suggest that in order to precipitate a real ‘declassification’ of art, and view the history of popular art forms from a convincing democratic perspective, it would have been preferable by far to establish why such texts deserve to be called literature, why such non-art should be reintegrated in the canon of 19th-century art, an issue which Rancière strangely turns a blind eye to, as if his blinkers were still those of the incorrigible intellectual bourgeoisie, whose vision of artistic production seems prepared to accommodate popular culture only to the extent that it can be digested by canonical ‘great art’. If modernist literature becomes interesting when it constructs a ‘floating world’ of dreams, drugs, criminals and prostitutes, then why not choose to study cases where such ‘deategorization’ was effectively implemented? What I mean, is that the choice of lending a voice to *les misérables*, and to the most miserable among the miserable, the poor young female prostitute, cannot possibly be entirely delegated to Victor Hugo’s Fantine in *Les Misérables* (1862), although this particular novel is in fact one of the very few convincing examples of popular literature and even ‘kitsch’ culture that Rancière ever mentions.¹⁷ My point, however, is that even Hugo’s text should be recontextualized, placed within a context, or a network, of similar texts and documents, some sort of archival continuum, in which Hugo should not necessarily be placed in the foreground.

I suggest that ‘New Journalism’, of the kind invented by William Thomas Stead, the author of *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon* (a series of articles on child prostitution in London published in 1885¹⁸), would have been the most obvious example of a reappropriation and narrative reconfiguration of the *fait divers*. Still, in order to illustrate Rancière’s point that the news item, in the course of the 19th century, came to be perceived as the visible though enigmatic tip of ‘a reticular system’ engaging the whole of society (124), it might also be possible to draw a parallel between this famous report and a selection of other texts, written on the same subject, by a feminist activist like Josephine Butler.¹⁹ Her treatment of the same kind of incidents draws on the combined techniques of the then extremely popular genres of the sensational novel and melodrama, a feature she has in common with Stead.²⁰ And both, it seems to me, lay the foundations of the dominant genre that was to impose itself in popular culture at the very end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th: detective literature. Indeed, the paradigm that they both shared was that of the necessity of the inquest, of an investigation into a muted, unsayable world, the existence

of which was suddenly revealed by the *fait divers* – the news item relating the disappearance of a young girl, the discovery of a prostitute’s dead body, the suicide of an actress, etc. A world that remained opaque –invisible, unsayable– demanded a new reading of society, a task in which the Middle and the Working Classes simultaneously engaged to challenge the established, policed order. And the epistemological task could only be undertaken by starting from odds and ends, by focusing on traces, signs, fragments of information, meaningless, discarded things: *clues*.

What is detective literature indeed, if not that kind of reconfiguration of the sensible that sees in each object, and even in each fragment of an object, a *clue*? And what is a clue, if not the trace of a wound inflicted on the poor and defenceless by a social system which distinguishes between those who are worthy of the protection of the State and those who are not, those who think and decide, and those who are considered as mere passive bodies, offered up for the consumption of the rich and powerful? What is a clue if not the possibility offered to the amateur detective or to the maverick representative of official authorities –never to the professional policeman, who owes his authority to State power–, to a *floating* subject, awkwardly poised between acceptability and inacceptability, and like Sherlock Holmes using drugs to suspend the time of means and ends, to perceive in trash or fragments, in discarded or broken objects, the hidden, suppressed, muted, silenced, unofficial reality that underlies the consensual representation of society? To perceive in tiny, otherwise neglected, unworthy details, a world, an hour, days of suffering, the narrative of a horror to be exposed, of a scandal to be revealed. The amateur detective – embodied by a lady taking the defence of prostitutes, by a journalist denouncing the perversion of the upper classes, or by a ‘queer’ sleuth, as Conan Doyle defines his character –introduces disagreement in the community, a dissensual voice in the consensual representation of the world. He or she is a character whose dissenting ‘mode of sensibility’ –call it ‘intuition,’ the very opposite of rational thinking– makes visible and audible unexpected, democratic networks of meaning-production. Such an ‘intuition’ is what ‘dissenters’ such as Josephine Butler and William Thomas Stead seem to have shared and foregrounded at exactly the same time that Arthur Conan Doyle was writing his first Holmes novel, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887).

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¹⁸ STEAD, W.T., «The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon», *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 6, 7, 8, 10 July 1885.

¹⁹ See for example, BUTLER, J., *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*, London, 1896.

²⁰ See HADLEY, E., *Melodramatic Tactics: Theatricalized Dissent in England’s Marketplace, 1800-1885*, Stanford, 1995.

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