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The Politics of Aesthetics

The Distribution of the Sensible

Jacques Rancière

Edited and translated by Gabriel Rockhill

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Editor's Preface

The Reconfiguration of Meaning

Gabriel Rockhill

Translation is often deplored, with a sense of self-satisfied disillusionment, as an impossible project. Since there are no objective criteria for evaluating the relationship between the source language and the target language, it is claimed that the latter remains fundamentally undetermined by the former. This situation has given birth to myriad possible responses: the cynical condemnation of all translation, the enthusiastic acceptance of the archipelago of independent language games, the valorization of translation as a unique form of writing with its own properly literary forms, the celebration of the abyss separating languages as an aesthetico-ethical opportunity to introduce a Proustian *langue étrangère dans la langue* . . .

These various reactions are at least correct in one respect: they reject the purportedly universal criteria of translation argued for by their adversaries (the deep structure of all discourse or the pure language whose echo can be heard in the interstices between individual languages). Nonetheless, this very polarization between universal translatability and the utter impossibility of a faithful rendering of the original – not to mention the middle ground cunningly occupied by those who declare translation to be at once possible and impossible – is in fact dependent on concrete criteria that provide an overall framework for thinking about translation.

The first of these criteria is, broadly speaking, historical. The conceptual network defining the basic elements and modalities of what is generally understood as translation is necessarily dependent on a historical situation. The very distinction between translation and adaptation, for example, has by no means remained a historical constant, and the same could be said of the relationship between original prose and plagiarism, transcription and revision, fidelity and infidelity.¹ In fact, these categories can only operate within a general logic of signification that confers meaning on them by situating them in a relational network. This explains why they are not even necessarily distributed according to the oppositions they appear to fall within and do not simply exist as empty categories whose content is provided by each new epoch. To put this point rather succinctly, the very meaning of 'translation' – and all of its corresponding parts – cannot be separated from the historical situation within which it functions.

The second major criterion is social. In order for a translation to be recognized as such and considered worthy of the name, it has to abide by the broad parameters operative in a particular community. These parameters need not necessarily impose a single model or method of translation, but they define the general coordinates within which translation can be distinguished from other discursive procedures. Each community establishes a logic of signification that presupposes a specific understanding of what meaning is, how it operates, the normative principles it should abide by, its function in social discourse, etc. Communities do, of course, come into conflict – both with themselves and with other communities – but the basic point remains unchanged: just as the translator never works in a historical vacuum, translation is never an isolated soliloquy uninformed by a community. In short, translation is neither based on universal criteria nor is it condemned to a solitary encounter with the intractable original. It is a historical practice that always takes place – implicitly or explicitly – within a social framework.

This means that translation, as I propose to understand it under the current circumstances, is not simply a form of mediation between two distinct languages. It is a relational reconfiguration of meaning via a logic of signification that is rendered possible by a socio-historical situation. This process can, in fact, take place within a single language, which does not, however, mean that understanding itself is an act of translation

or that we are condemned to endlessly paraphrasing our original ideas. An alternate logic of signification can actually use the exact same words to mean something entirely different because it determines the very structure of meaning, the horizons of what is qualified as language, the *modi operandi* of words and sentences, the entire network that defines the process of signification. Thus, when translation does occur between two languages, the overall logic of signification is often more important than the differences between the languages themselves because it determines the very limits between these two languages, how meaning operates in each of them, the semantic relationships that need to be preserved and those that can be discarded, etc.

Prior to being a choice about certain words, the act of translation is a choice concerning the logic of signification in which these words function. In the case of the present translation, I have chosen to distance myself from one of the dominant methods of translation for rendering contemporary French intellectuals in English, which is historically the heir to a logic of signification based on the inviolable sacred status of the original text. This method has led to the use of every possible typographical and etymological artifice to prove – with indisputable success in some cases – that it is impossible to translate between different languages. The end result has often been a sacred jargon of authenticity that is cunningly appropriated by the high priests of the unknown in order to reconstruct the original syntax behind the translation and unveil the unsaid in the said. Thus, in spite of its obsessive preoccupation with the impossibility of grasping the original text, this method of translation is paradoxically based on establishing the greatest possible typographic proximity to the sacred original. In fact, the ultimate telos of this method can only be described in terms of an asymptote where the vertical axis would be the verbatim identity between the translation and the original work (whose ultimate consequences were deduced by Borges' Pierre Menard).²

Rather than aiming at asymptotically transcribing Jacques Rancière's work into an idiom for the initiated, the following translation was made within the coordinates of an entirely different logic of signification. The primary unit of translation was not taken to be the typography of an individual word or the uniformity of a particular concept, but the entire relational system of signification at work. Strictly speaking, there is no basic unit of translation since there are only relations within and between

systems of signification. This has meant abandoning the supposed autarchy of the individual text and the mantra-like motto '*sola scriptura*' in order to analyse the relational network within which Rancière's work has emerged. More specifically, it has required studying, in both French and English, Rancière's entire corpus, his standard historical references (from Plato and the New Testament to Balzac and Rossellini), and the work of his contemporary interlocutors. The objective of the current translation might therefore best be described in terms of a relational reconfiguration of meaning that recasts Rancière's work in an alternate system of signification. This reconfiguration inevitably masks certain aspects of his work in French, but hopefully only insofar as it simultaneously opens up the possibility that other aspects thereby become visible.

Only part of the current publication is a translation of Jacques Rancière's *Le Partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique* (Paris: La Fabrique-éditions, 2000). In addition to a brief introduction to Rancière's work and an afterword by Slavoj Žižek, the reader will also find an interview conducted for the English edition, a glossary of technical terms, and a bibliography of primary and secondary sources.

I would like to personally acknowledge the invaluable contribution made by Radmila Djordjevic as well as by Emiliano Battista, Pierre-Antoine Chardel, Andrew Parker, Ludovic Soutif, and Yves Winter. Finally, my gratitude to Jacques Rancière is inestimable. In addition to agreeing to an interview for the English edition, he has taken the time to clarify certain passages and has provided helpful suggestions concerning the glossary and bibliography. His generous contribution has helped make the current volume much more than a translation of the original French publication.

Editor's Introduction

Jacques Rancière's Politics of Perception³

Gabriel Rockhill

As Alain Badiou has aptly pointed out, Jacques Rancière's work does not belong to any particular academic community but rather inhabits unknown intervals 'between history and philosophy, between philosophy and politics, and between documentary and fiction' (1998: 122). His unique methodology, eclectic research habits, and voracious propensity for assimilating European intellectual and cultural history are comparable perhaps only to the unclassifiable work of Michel Foucault, an author with whom he himself acknowledges certain affinities. If his voice has yet to be heard in full force in the English-speaking world due to a lack of translations and sufficient secondary literature, it is perhaps attributable to what Rancière himself has called the distribution of the sensible, or the system of divisions and boundaries that define, among other things, what is visible and audible within a particular aesthetico-political regime.

Although closely affiliated with the group of neo-Marxists working around Althusser in the 1960s, Rancière's virulent criticisms of the latter as of 1968 served to distance him from the author with whom he had shared the common project *Lire le Capital* in 1965. As Rancière explained in the Preface to *La Leçon d'Althusser* (1974), the theoretical and political distance separating his work from Althusserian Marxism was

partially a result of the events of 1968 and the realization that Althusser's school was a 'philosophy of order' whose very principles anaesthetized the revolt against the bourgeoisie. Uninspired by the political options proposed by thinkers such as Deleuze and Lyotard, Rancière saw in the politics of difference the risk of reversing Marx's statement in the *Thesis on Feuerbach*: 'We tried to transform the world in diverse ways, now it is a matter of interpreting it' (1974: 14). These criticisms of the response by certain intellectuals to the events of May 1968 eventually led him to a critical re-examination of the social, political, and historical forces operative in the production of theory.

In the first two books to follow the collection of essays on Althusser, Rancière explored a question that would continue to preoccupy him in his later work: from what position do we speak and in the name of what or whom? Whereas *La Nuit des prolétaires* (1981) proceeded via the route of meticulous historical research to unmask the illusions of representation and give voice to certain mute events in the history of workers' emancipation, *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres* (1983) provided a conceptualization of the relationship between thought and society, philosophic representation and its concrete historical object. Both of these works contributed to undermining the privileged position usurped by philosophy in its various attempts to speak for others, be it the proletariat, the poor, or anyone else who is not 'destined to think'. However, far from advocating a populist stance and claiming to finally bestow a specific identity on the underprivileged, Rancière thwarted the artifice at work in the discourses founded on the singularity of the other by revealing the ways in which they are ultimately predicated on keeping the other in its place.

This general criticism of social and political philosophy was counter-balanced by a more positive account of the relationship between the 'intellectual' and the emancipation of society in Rancière's fourth book, *Le Maître ignorant* (1987). Analysing the life and work of Joseph Jacotet, Rancière argued in favour of a pedagogical methodology that would abolish any presupposed inequalities of intelligence such as the academic hierarchy of master and disciple. For Rancière, equality should not be thought of in terms of a goal to be attained by working through the lessons promulgated by prominent social and political thinkers. On the contrary, it is the very axiomatic point of departure whose sporadic reappearance

via disturbances in the set system of social inequalities is the very essence of emancipation. This explains, in part, Rancière's general rejection of political philosophy, understood as the theoretical enterprise that abolishes politics proper by identifying it with the 'police' (see below). It also sheds light on his own attempt to work as an 'ignorant schoolmaster' who – rather than transmitting performatively contradictory lessons on the content of emancipation – aims at giving a voice to those excluded from the hierarchies of knowledge.

With the more recent publication of *Aux Bords du politique* (1990) and *La Méésentente* (1995), Rancière has further elaborated a politics of democratic emancipation, which might best be understood in terms of its central concepts. The *police*, to begin with, is defined as an organizational system of coordinates that establishes a distribution of the sensible or a law that divides the community into groups, social positions, and functions. This law implicitly separates those who take part from those who are excluded, and it therefore presupposes a prior aesthetic division between the visible and the invisible, the audible and the inaudible, the sayable and the unsayable. The essence of *politics* consists in interrupting the distribution of the sensible by supplementing it with those who have no part in the perceptual coordinates of the community, thereby modifying the very aesthetico-political field of possibility. It is partially for this reason that Rancière defines *the political* as relational in nature, founded on the intervention of politics in the police order rather than on the establishment of a particular governmental regime. Moreover, politics in its strict sense never presupposes a reified subject or predefined group of individuals such as the proletariat, the poor, or minorities. On the contrary, the only possible subject of politics is the *people* or the *dēmos*, i.e. the supplementary part of every account of the population. Those who have no name, who remain invisible and inaudible, can only penetrate the police order via a mode of *subjectivization* that transforms the aesthetic coordinates of the community by implementing the universal presupposition of politics: we are all equal. *Democracy* itself is defined by these intermittent acts of political subjectivization that reconfigure the communal distribution of the sensible. However, just as *equality* is not a goal to be attained but a presupposition in need of constant verification, democracy is neither a form of government nor a style of social life. Democratic *emancipation* is a random process that redistributes the system of sensible coordinates

without being able to guarantee the absolute elimination of the social inequalities inherent in the police order.

The irresolvable conflict between politics and the police, most visible perhaps in the perennial persistence of a *wrong* that cannot be resolved by juridical litigation, has led many readers to interpret *La Mésentente* as a simple continuation of Lyotard's *Le Différend* (1983). Although a conceptual proximity is readily apparent, Rancière is careful to distinguish his project from what he considers to be the essentially discursive nature of *le différend*. According to his definition, *disagreement* is neither a misunderstanding nor a general lack of comprehension. It is a conflict over what is meant by 'to speak' and over the very distribution of the sensible that delimits the horizons of the sayable and determines the relationship between seeing, hearing, doing, making, and thinking. In other words, disagreement is less a clash between heterogeneous phrase regimens or genres of discourse than a conflict between a given distribution of the sensible and what remains outside it.

Beginning with the publication of *Courts Voyages au pays du peuple* (1990) and up to his most recent work on film and modern art, Rancière has repeatedly foregrounded his long-standing interest in aesthetics while at the same time analysing its conjunction with both politics and history. In positioning himself against the Sartrean preoccupation with *engagement* and the more recent hegemony of the *Tel Quel* group, Rancière presents his reader with a unique account of aesthetics as well as an innovative description of its major regimes. According to the genealogy he has undertaken, the *ethical regime* of images characteristic of Platonism is primarily concerned with the origin and telos of imagery in relationship to the ethos of the community. It establishes a distribution of images – without, however, identifying 'art' in the singular – that rigorously distinguishes between artistic simulacra and the 'true arts' used to educate the citizenry concerning their role in the communal body. The *representative regime* is an artistic system of Aristotelian heritage that liberates imitation from the constraints of ethical utility and isolates a normatively autonomous domain with its own rules for fabrication and criteria of evaluation. The *aesthetic regime* of art puts this entire system of norms into question by abolishing the dichotomous structure of *mimēsis* in the name of a contradictory identification between *logos* and *pathos*. It thereby provokes a transformation in the distribution of the sensible established by the representative regime, which leads from