

Chapter 5

Equality in the Romantic Art Form: The Hegelian Background to Jacques Rancière's 'Aesthetic Revolution'

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In his book *La Parole muette*, Jacques Rancière seems to agree with the key theses of Hegel's account of the Romantic art form. For Hegel, Romanticism institutes a new category of aesthetic value that admits the entry of the everyday and the ordinary into the field of art. According to Hegel's powerful account, Romantic art removes the classical restrictions from *what* art can represent, and *how* it should be represented. Similarly, Rancière treats the art of what he calls the 'aesthetic regime of the arts', which includes what is typically classified as Romanticism, in terms of its peculiar knotting together of the prosaic and the poetic. He revises the Hegelian formulation where art practice was cut loose from the classical hierarchies that had determined appropriate topics and techniques in terms of the political vocabulary of 'equality'. It is significant that for each, the entry of prosaic material into the field of the arts complicates the meaning of the category of the 'arts'. Like Hegel, Rancière singles out the literary arts of the 'word' as *the* historically significant form of Romantic art; for Rancière it is in literature that the 'disorder' affecting the modern category of the 'arts' first becomes visible. In this regard, he points specifically to the Romantic presumption of a plenitude of meaning in the world that literature would 'speak' as a case study of 'equality'.¹ Rancière's analysis is, however, again like Hegel's, no celebration of Romanticism, no simple recounting of its revolutionary impact. For each thinker, the intrusion of 'equality' that marks the field of Romantic art as a disturbance of the traditional hierarchies which had governed classical topic and technique does not just imply the eventual dissolution of the Romantic art form – and along with it, perhaps, the semantic integrity of the very category of 'art' – but also draws

attention to the need for a critical, systematic articulation of the contradictory features of Romanticism.²

Nonetheless, the criticisms each makes of the Romantic art form service the claims of radically incompatible frameworks: Rancière is frustrated at the uneven recognition of equality in Romanticism and thus coordinates his discussion of the 'aesthetic regime of the arts', to which Romanticism belongs, with a political conception of equality able to locate and describe particular cases of deficient treatments of this theme in the Romantic paradigm. Hegel, in contrast, identifies in the prosaic material of Romantic art the justification for his historical thesis that art, as a mode of access to the absolute, is at an end. In other words, what Rancière identifies as the nascent signs of equality whose promise is deliberately curtailed, Hegel uses as evidence for the new hierarchical claims of the reflective dominance of philosophy.

Rancière's analysis of Romanticism aims to locate and defend the evidence of the efficacy of what he terms 'the aesthetic revolution'; briefly, the ways in which aesthetic practices are conceptualized as (and capable of being) engaged in the redesign of life. However, it also puts forward an explanatory schema that would make the different narratives of art – from Schiller and Benjamin to Adorno and Lyotard – intelligible as positions that endorse aspects of this aesthetic revolution. The critical motivation of this schema can be seen in the way that Rancière highlights the paradoxical commitments regarding the modes and effects of the communication of new perceptual modes of experience in each of these thinkers. Considered in relation to the stakes and implications of this critical reflection on the legacy of Romanticism, Hegel occupies an unusual position. In fact, Rancière equivocates on Hegel's significance for his analysis of the aesthetic revolution. In some writings he insists that the positions associated with Hegel are not exclusively tied to the proper name of Hegel but articulate a general narrative structure regarding the place of the arts in modernity that underpins the cogency of diverse positions.³ In other places, he defends the specific pertinence of Hegel's formulations regarding the arts against the meaning that has been assigned to them.⁴ To my mind, this equivocation is indicative of the over-determined position that Hegel occupies in Rancière's reflections on Romanticism.

At first glance, Hegel's writing on aesthetics recommends a comparative treatment with Rancière's work because, like Rancière, his *Aesthetics* defends a thesis regarding the significance of modern literature for conceptualizing the porosity of the modern category of the arts. However, what sharpens the

implications of this comparative point is the fact that it is Hegel's conception of modern aesthetics, more than any other, which presents a competing position regarding the significance and implications of the 'aesthetic revolution' to the one that Rancière builds up and defends through an appeal to literary and philosophical examples. In this respect, the figure of Hegel may be used to qualify the seemingly compelling reasons often given for the selection of Kant and Schiller as the historical precursors for Rancière's use of aesthetics.⁵ Neither Kant nor Schiller provides a critical and systematic perspective on literary Romanticism, which is the core reference for many of Rancière's recent writings. My intention in this essay is to provide an account of the significance that Rancière's writing arguably gives to Hegel against the background of their respective treatments of literary Romanticism. Rancière's engagement with philosophical aesthetics is a critically motivated one. Careful study of how this engagement positions Hegel can help identify and assess the assumptions that guide Rancière's contention that aesthetic topics and, in particular, the Romantic literary word, has political salience.

1 The Poetic Word in the Romantic Art Form: The Origins of the 'Aesthetic Revolution'

Hegel's treatment of the theme of the modern rise of the prosaic in art functions as an account, but also endorsement, of a particularly marked historical tendency: the diminution of the so-called 'absolute' significance of the arts in modernity. The entry of prosaic material into the field of art is, for Hegel, the precursor to the increasing importance of 'the prose of thought': such prose becomes, in modernity, more adequate than the sensuous mediums of art for expressing the increasing complexity of the Idea of freedom. To some extent, this thesis receives its historical corroboration in the indispensable role of criticism for the reception of the arts in the age of their aesthetic autonomy. According to Hegel's triadic conception of art forms, the earlier symbolic and classical forms of art had provided a depiction and rendering of immediate religious significance and meaning, first in the 'universal' architecture of temples, and then in the sculpture of the statues of the Gods that, in Hegel's idiom, 'particularize' the divine. In contrast, the modern arts of the Romantic art form depict, he says, the 'singular' religious 'community'.⁶ The emancipation of Romantic art from the function of the depiction of God in the reflective age of Protestantism

When Emma falls for Rodolphe, she perceives little gleams of gold about his pupils, smells a perfume of lemon and vanilla, and looks at the long plume of dust raised by the stagecoach. And when she first falls for Leon, 'weeds streamed out in the limpid water like green wigs tossed away. Now and then some fine-legged insects alighted on the tip of a reed or crawled over a water-lily leaf. The sunshine darted its rays through the little blue bubbles on the wavelets that kept forming and breaking' (Madame Bovary, 107). This is what happens: 'little blue bubbles' on wavelets in the sunshine, or swirls of dust raised by the wind. This is what the characters feel and what makes them happy: a pure flood of sensations.¹⁹

Rancière also understands Deleuze's ontology as a form of such a micro-physical account of 'reality'. This interest in the new microphysics of perception that Flaubert and Deleuze each propose is, however, no enthusiastic endorsement of either writer, and Rancière uses the idea of literary equality to make specifically critical mention of the ways that each articulate a new perceptual order that confounds the precepts of their 'impressionist poetics'. Hence he criticizes Deleuze's mistaken view that the field of forces he describes in words is the way things are primarily, as if 'words' would provide passage to a Deleuzian 'world'. He also points out Deleuze's dependence on literary 'characters' in Melville and 'plot' lines in Kafka to elucidate his pre-personal ontology of a field that is supposedly without structure and direction. Similarly, he complains that Flaubert still wishes to defend the semantic integrity of the concept of art against the democratic intrusions of the merely prosaic. These critical points are best seen as a form of fidelity to 'aesthetic equality'. According to this idea, literary meanings should be considered in the perspective of an ongoing process of productive reception that reshapes the existing basic categories and boundaries of sensory experience as such. Against Deleuze's use of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* to corroborate his ontology of micro-transformations, therefore, Rancière holds that Gregor's transformation is and is not 'literal'.²⁰ Similarly, the entry of prosaic material into the field of art really does mean (despite Flaubert's condemnation of Emma Bovary) that anything can have aesthetic significance for anyone.

It is worth emphasizing the understanding of the 'aesthetic' that this position entails: from the modern awareness of the porous line separating the prosaic from the poetic arises the consequence that the 'aesthetic' refers to the democratic field of sensory experience, rather than (as Hegel, for instance, had wished) the restricted field of the philosophy of art.

The implications of this point are especially clear in Rancière's writing on politics. Above all, Rancière understands politics to be the exercise of a

kind of speech, and thus defines it as a particular use of words that may occur anywhere. 'Politics occurs wherever a community with the capacity to argue and to make metaphors is likely to crop up.'²¹ In his well-known reformulation of Aristotle's description of man as an animal with the additional capacity for politics, Rancière highlights the way that the literary condition of politics is what effects a dis-incorporation of established meanings from bodies: 'Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his "natural" purpose by the power of words.'²²

He disagrees therefore with Hegel's restriction of politics to the operations of a specific sphere. Hegel's philosophical account of the modern, bureaucratic state – in which struggle is a stage that has been surpassed – is at the antipodes of Rancière's 'politics of aesthetics' in which neither history nor institutions can fully remedy the causes nor quash the prospects of continuous 'political' struggle. Thus Rancière describes political philosophy as the antithesis to 'politics' precisely because, in his view, this region of philosophy constitutes the project of reflecting on and refining the institutional mechanisms that represent and advocate the interests of identifiable social actors. 'Politics', in contrast, consists in those speech acts that come from anywhere to contest even the ontological order, what he terms the 'divisions' of the sensible. In this sense, politics is 'aesthetic' for Rancière because it consists in altering and reframing the field of sensory experience; but as it is specifically 'words' that bear the capacity to reorganize the sensory field, the topic of how words exceed the meanings they embody is a recurrent theme in his writing and one that joins together his treatment of literary and political topics. The reasons for the emphasis he places on the contradictory features of literary Romanticism can be understood in terms of his view that 'words' are the mechanism of equality. Literary equality is thereby used as proof of the contingent nature of any re-functionalization of the 'sensible'. This proof, however, needs to be qualified: the literary word only has the *potential* to reframe experience.

3 Word Scenes

It is clear that neither in the literary nor the political domains are 'words' themselves sufficient to alter socially established modes of perception.²³ Accordingly, Rancière stresses that it is the 'account' made of speech (how and when speech is understood to configure a polemical world) rather than the fact of speaking that is important for any consideration of its political force²⁴; and he makes a similar point in the context of literary

words, when he claims that it is not 'mere words' alone that are at stake.²⁵ In the theoretical field he holds that theoretical discourse is 'always simultaneously an aesthetic form, a sensible reconfiguration of the facts it is arguing about'.²⁶ These caveats raise the question of the significance of the story motif in his critique of Hegel's proposed narrative of the re-functioning of the material sensible; and they emphasize the distinction that needs to be made between the promise of the 'aesthetic revolution' and whether and how the presentation of this promise can be understood to be politically effective.²⁷

Rancière claims that Hegel's analysis of the Romantic art form is symptomatic of one of the main plot lines of the 'aesthetic regime of the arts'. These plot lines sustain the promise of extra-aesthetic significance for the arts. The thesis of the 'end of art' is 'not simply', he argues, 'a personal theorization by Hegel'.²⁸ Hegel's position:

clings to the plot of the life of art as 'the spirit of forms'. That spirit is the 'heterogeneous sensible', the identity of art and non-art. The plot has it that when art ceases to be non-art, it is no longer art either. Poetry is poetry, says Hegel, so long as prose is confused with poetry. When prose is only prose, there is no more heterogeneous sensible.²⁹

Like most plots, this one needs a temporal scope to unfold. This plot ends in such a way as to raise the problem of how to 'reassess the heterogeneous sensible' since it invalidates the 'formula of art becoming life ... a new life does not need a new art. On the contrary, the specificity of the new life is that it does not need art'.³⁰ The implication is that Hegel formulates the positive contradiction of post-Romantic art, but he fails to see the productive role of this contradiction and accordingly opts for an ending in which it is resolved: material forms as eloquent bodies of meaning in the religious past of art on one side, and meaning as it is disclosed and clarified in the thought of prose on the other. In other words, Hegel 'frames' aesthetic experience; he transfers the properties of the aesthetic experience to the work of art itself, 'cancelling their projection into a new life and invalidating the aesthetic revolution'.³¹ Hegel's version of the story is thus contrasted to the various Romantic and Marxist attempts to retain a 'heterogeneous sensible'. These latter attempts operate through a kind of doubling of materiality: things are not just things but are also the meanings, such as the extra-aesthetic promise, that can be attached to them. But in Rancière's view, the legacy of such attempts to poeticize the prosaic also has troubling aspects. This is because these attempts end in the

practice of an endless deciphering of the meaning of the sensible experience.

This new poetics frames a new hermeneutics, taking upon itself the task of making society conscious of its own secrets, by leaving the noisy stage of political claims and doctrines and sinking to the depths of the social, to disclose the enigmas and fantasies hidden in the intimate realities of everyday life.³²

Such meta-politics – and among the examples he cites are Benjamin's literary-styled analysis of the commodity form – borrows the plot invented by so-called realist literature. It documents the depth to be found in its poetic presentation of the prosaic: 'Telling the truth on the surface by travelling in the underground, spelling out the unconscious social text lying underneath – that ... was a plot invented by literature itself'.³³

In a sense, Rancière does not quite get away from the narrative. Maybe he sees no need to do so. In contrast to the other plots in which the narrative drama concerns how prosaic things bear significant meaning, and which concerns itself with how to decipher this meaning, Rancière's 'politics of aesthetics' commits him to a version of the story in which it is the 'words' rather than the 'things' that harbour new expressive contents and possible contestable meanings.³⁴ This is the way that he corrects Marxist meta-politics. The plenitude of meaning attached to words is not exhaustible, and he invests accordingly in the promise that the materiality of the word is a field of new possibilities of meaning. Words are the material forces whose meaning is doubled; they both mean what they say and are silent. This silence is their aesthetic 'promise'. The other side of this 'promise', in which Rancière might be seen to be close to Hegel, is that the political (or for Hegel, the scientific) use of words is guided by the intelligibility of meanings rather than the mysticism of depth hermeneutics.

4 Conclusion

The dynamic of heterogeneous sensibility that Romanticism discloses as the narrative core of art is the historical precursor and the aesthetic form used in Rancière's defence of political equality. The story's promise of aesthetic efficacy is the pivot of his conception of politics, which turns on the possibility not of a mere redistribution of the sensible, but a redistribution that has the political force to alter social perceptions, possibly at fundamental

levels. Finally, this requirement of politically significant redistribution couples Rancière's aesthetics to the formative capacity not of mere 'words', but 'stories' – including the terms of the story he tells regarding the contradictory form of prosaic words and literary meanings.

Alain Badiou has claimed that 'Rancière is an heir to Foucault' because his 'approach consists in a rebellious apprehension of discursive positivities'³⁵. It seems to me that in its distinctive features, some of which are set out above, Rancière's thought happily inhabits the assumptions of the post-Marxist way of practising politics, which is firmly rooted in literary utopianism. Michel Foucault did not belong to this particular academic community. When he commented on it, however, he was critical of the 'very heavy political blockage' that occurs around the use of literature or literary motifs – and here we can include 'words', 'stories' and 'plots' – as a path for the diagnosis of political circumstances.³⁶

Even as it calls into question certain aspects and patterns of formation of this practice, Rancière's thinking belongs within the discursive field that articulates the stakes of political topics in literary terms. Above all, this can be seen in his idiosyncratic understanding of politics being about word-use, and the literary-philosophical examples that his most recent work uses to explore the potential alteration of established modes of perception.³⁷ The 'discourse' that consists in looking to literature to articulate alternative political meanings, as Rancière does with the category of the 'equality' of words, is, as he well knows, an heir to post-Kantian Romanticism. In this tradition, ideas that would otherwise be experientially poor are given cogent form. It is Rancière's peculiar achievement to have charted the logic of the field of this particular academic community as an efficacious 'plot' (as opposed to a sociologically correctible error) and in so doing, to have found a new way to inhabit and extend it. Looked at this way, it may well be that it is the potential communicative force of the new meanings he ascribes to the word 'politics' that will be the ultimate test of Rancière's 'aesthetic revolution'.

Chapter 6

No Time or Place for Universal Teaching: *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and Contemporary Work on Pedagogy

Caroline Pelletier

When the editors of this book asked if I could write something on how Rancière had contributed to pedagogy as a discipline and what educationalists might have to say in response to his work, I thought this might make for a short chapter. Rancière has nothing to say on how schools might improve their methods of teaching and learning. His work is not an addition or an alternative to disciplines laying claim to pedagogy as their object, such as the sociology of education and educational psychology. In terms of how his work has been received in education, it has generated less discussion than in philosophy or history, judging by the number of references in these subjects' respective journals. Anecdotal impression suggests that *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*¹ is more widely read among artists than among teachers.

Part of this picture is changing as a result of secondary literature, which has brought Rancière's work to the attention of people working in education. For example, Bingham and Biesta's recent book draws on Rancière's ideas to explore contemporary debates in education, and also to read texts from other disciplines as instances of pedagogy – a move which shows pedagogy to be a problem about how to write, read and speak; what it is to teach and learn in any place or time, rather than a specific concern for educationalists and schools only.²

However, the relative patchiness of reference to Rancière's work in education is not solely due, I think, to lack of awareness. There is also something unreadable about his argument, in the sense that it does not appear relevant to the field of education. I say this on the basis of responses I have had to a couple of articles about Rancière's work,³ from colleagues in my own and other education departments. Although these have generally had a positive response, a recurring comment is that Rancière's ideas are also untimely. This is usually attributed to one or both of two posited phenomena.

leaves art free to explore its own mediums and techniques, but also hollows out the significance of such reflection: art's modern, Romantic fate is ultimately a self-commentary on historical art forms. The final indication of its newfound status, which is also a further corroboration of Hegel's characterization of the modern, reflective age, is that these new art forms are no longer 'luminous' enough to be understood without the elucidations of criticism. They are no longer a direct mode of access to the absolute, but for this very reason no longer 'absolute' in the sense of self-standing forms; art continues, but does so in the mode of deficient, criticism-dependent works.⁷

The point of transition to this situation is marked out by the altered status of the poetic word in Romanticism. This word 'passes from the poetry of imagination into the prose of thought' because unlike the other Romantic arts of music and painting, the word strips back the material mediums of art forms: 'Poetry is the universal art of the mind which has become free in its own nature, and which is not tied to find its realization in external sensuous matter, but expatiates exclusively in the inner space and inner time of the ideas and feelings.'⁸ Hegel's treatment of the modern arts depends substantially on the contrasting functions and values of an 'inner' field of ideas and feelings and the 'external' sensuous terrain that is the impoverished stage that 'ties' the alienated, unhappy consciousness to external matter.⁹ It is striking that the form of the Hegelian vocabulary, which pits 'matter' this way against 'ideas' and 'feelings', is used in adapted form by Rancière to drive aspects of his own conceptual vocabulary, and especially his treatment of words. In particular, he uses the separation between words and the incarnation of their meaning in bodies as a conceptual schema to characterize literature: 'Literature lives only by the separation of words in relation to anybody that might incarnate their power. It lives only by evading the incarnation that it incessantly puts into play.'¹⁰ This dynamic of failed incarnation of literary meaning, which has its parallel in his account of the failed transition from 'words' to new 'worlds' in philosophy is, for Rancière, the promise of the aesthetic revolution, which Hegel's division of spheres shuts down. Hegel's very description of the different vocations and features of poetry and the prose of thought reveals, in Rancière's telling, an inadequate assimilation of the (Romantic) insight of equality, which Hegel's general position on the arts otherwise seems to absorb.¹¹

Rancière's writing stresses the fragility of the distinction between the fields of 'art' and 'non-art' and explains how the Romantic incorporation of the 'ordinary' as subject matter for 'art' evocatively displays this fragility. He captures something significant about the status of modern art when he

holds that art is art insofar as it is not entirely distinct from non-art. He credits this insight to Hegel.¹² More specifically, he describes modern art as both a point that courts its self-dissolution into everyday objects and forms, on one side, and a 'life of forms' able to be distinguished from the everyday, on the other.¹³ Ultimately, many of his critical points regarding Romantic literature concern the different ways in which Romantic writers suppress their own insight into the porous line between the exceptional, sublime figures of art and their democratic distribution of aesthetic value to the everyday. Rancière analyses the modern 'idea' of art as that which is practised, conceived and played out between these poles of absolute heteronomy (dissolution into the everyday) and qualified autonomy (a life of forms beyond this). At the same time, it is clear that he is much less interested in debates over the constituent features of 'art works' than he is in the defence of a concept of 'aesthetic experience'. He understands this concept in ontological terms as the field of the sensory settings of experience. He specifies these settings in the language of equality, being prior to any specific distribution of social functions and capacities. In fact, it is this highly specific understanding of 'aesthetic experience' that orients his treatment of the contradictory conception of 'art' in Romanticism and regulates the significance he attaches to the 'prosaic'. Among other things, this position on aesthetics has consequences for the partitioning of intellectual fields. Aesthetics concerns the 'configuration of a common world'. This means not just that the 'aesthetic experience reaches far beyond the sphere of art', but that 'reflection on these "aesthetic" issues requires ... a form of aesthetic discourse which is not a specialization within philosophy, but, on the contrary, crosses the frontiers of the disciplines and ignores the hierarchy of levels of discourses.'¹⁴

Rancière's criticisms of Hegel's re-functioning of the prosaic world raise two inter-related issues: 1) the specific question of what is involved in the aesthetic, material dimensions of words when these are treated under the lens of 'equality'; and 2) how to deal with the general implications of the story that Hegel tells regarding the modern restrictions on aesthetic meaning.

These issues are related because the prosaic features of word-use that Hegel identifies in his analysis of Romanticism are presented in such a way that, in Rancière's terms, 'a configuration of modernity as a new partition of the perceptible, with no point of heterogeneity', is formed. 'In this partition, rationalization of the different spheres of activity becomes a response both to the old hierarchical orders and to the "aesthetic revolution."¹⁵ The 'old hierarchical orders' entailed established ways of organizing perception