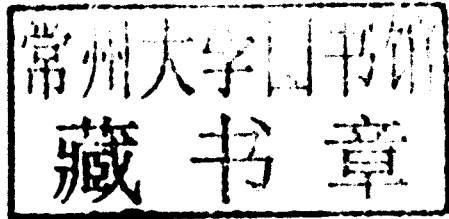


# JACQUES RANCIERE

# The Politics of Literature

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Jacques Rancière



Translated by Julie Rose

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‘The Putting to Death of Madame Bovary’ is the French version of a conference paper given in February 2006 at the University of Chicago within the framework of the Danziger Lectures, at the invitation of Danielle Allen.

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'The Gay Science of Bertolt Brecht' was published in an issue of *Les Cahiers de L'Herne* dedicated to Bertolt Brecht, and edited by Bernard Dort and Jean-François Peyret. See *Les Cahiers de L'Herne*, No. 35/1, 1979.

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# Part I

## Hypotheses

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# 1

## The Politics of Literature

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The politics of literature is not the same thing as the politics of writers. It does not concern the personal engagements of writers in the social or political struggles of their times. Neither does it concern the way writers represent social structures, political movements or various identities in their books. The expression 'politics of literature' implies that literature does politics simply by being literature. It assumes that we don't need to worry about whether writers should go in for politics or stick to the purity of their art instead, but that this very purity has something to do with politics. It assumes that there is an essential connection between politics as a specific form of collective practice and literature as a well-defined practice of the art of writing.

Putting the problem this way, then, obliges us to spell out the terms explicitly. I will do so briefly first for politics. Politics is often confused with the exercise of power and the struggle for power. But it is not enough that there be power for there to be politics. It is not even enough that there be laws regulating collective life. What is needed is a configuration of a specific form of community. Politics is the construction of a specific sphere of experience in which certain objects are posited as shared and certain subjects regarded as capable of designating these objects and of arguing about them. But such a construction is not a fixed given resting on an anthropological invariable. The given on which politics rests is always litigious. A celebrated Aristotelian

formula declares that men are political beings because they have speech, which allows them to share the just and the unjust, whereas animals only have a voice that expresses pleasure or pain. But the whole issue lies in knowing who is qualified to judge what is deliberative speech and what is expression of displeasure. In a sense, all political activity is a conflict aimed at deciding what is speech or mere growl; in other words, aimed at retracing the perceptible boundaries by means of which political capacity is demonstrated. Plato's *Republic* shows at the outset that artisans don't have the time to do anything other than their work: their occupation, their timetable and the capabilities that adapt them to it prohibit them from acceding to this supplement that political activity constitutes. Now, politics begins precisely when this impossibility is challenged, when those men and women who don't have the time to do anything other than their work take the time they don't have to prove that they are indeed speaking beings, participating in a shared world and not furious or suffering animals. This distribution and this redistribution of space and time, place and identity, speech and noise, the visible and the invisible, form what I call the distribution of the perceptible. Political activity reconfigures the distribution of the perceptible. It introduces new objects and subjects onto the common stage. It makes visible what was invisible, it makes audible as speaking beings those who were previously heard only as noisy animals.

The expression 'politics of literature' thereby implies that literature intervenes as literature in this carving up of space and time, the visible and the invisible, speech and noise. It intervenes in the relationship between practices and forms of visibility and modes of saying that carves up one or more common worlds.

The question now is: 'what do we mean by "literature as literature?"' 'Literature' is not some transhistoric term designating everything ever produced by the arts of speech and writing. The word took on the commonplace meaning it now has only rather late in the day. In Europe, it wasn't until the nineteenth century that it shed its old meaning, as the knowledge held by men of letters, and came to refer instead to the art of writing itself. Madame de Staël's work, *On Literature Considered in its Relationships With Social Institutions*, which came out in the year 1800, is often taken as the manifesto of this new usage. Yet many

critics have behaved as though that were merely swapping one name for another, and have accordingly worked at establishing a relationship between events and political currents, as historically defined, and an atemporal concept of literature. Others have tried to take the historicity of the concept of literature into account, but have generally done so within the framework of the modernist paradigm. This paradigm determines artistic modernity as the break of every kind of art with the enslavement of representation, which made all art the means of expression of an external referent, and art's concentration, instead, on its own materiality. So literary modernity has been styled as the implementation of an intransitive use of language as opposed to its communicative use. In determining the relationship between politics and literature, this was a most problematic criterion, one that quickly led to a dilemma: either the autonomy of literary language was contrasted with some political use, considered as an instrumentalization of literature; or a solidarity between literary intransitivity, seen as the affirmation of the materialist primacy of the signifier, was authoritatively asserted, along with the materialist rationality of revolutionary practice. In *What Is Literature?* Sartre proposed a sort of amicable agreement by contrasting poetic intransitivity with literary transitivity. Poets, he said, use words like things. When Rimbaud wrote 'What soul is without flaw?' he clearly wasn't asking a question of any kind but was making the phrase into an opaque substance, similar to one of Tintoretto's yellow skies.<sup>1</sup> So it makes no sense to talk about engagement on the part of poetry. On the other hand, writers are in the business of producing meanings. They use words as communication tools and thereby find themselves engaged, whether they like it or not, in the tasks of constructing a common world.

Unfortunately, this amicable agreement solved absolutely nothing. No sooner had he anchored the engagement of literary prose in its very use of language than Sartre had to explain why writers like Flaubert had hijacked the transparency of prosaic language and transformed the means of literary communication into an end in itself. He had to find the reason for this in the

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature? And Other Essays*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988, trans. Bernard Frechtman, introd. Steven Ungar, p. 27.

conjunction between the personal neurosis of the young Flaubert and the sombre realities of the class struggle of Flaubert's day. And so he had to look outside literature for literature's inherently political nature, its 'politicity', which he had claimed was based on its specific use of language. This vicious circle is not some individual mistake. It is connected to the desire to anchor the specificity of literature in language. Such a desire is itself connected to the simplifications of the modernist paradigm of the arts. That paradigm tries to anchor the autonomy of the arts in their own materiality. It thereby requires the claim of a material specificity for literary language. But this material specificity proves impossible to find. The communicational functions and the poetic functions of language actually never cease to overlap, as much in ordinary communication, which is crawling with tropes, as in poetic practice, which is able to turn perfectly transparent utterances to its own advantage. Rimbaud's line 'What soul is without flaw?' clearly does not call for a count of souls answering to that condition. Yet we still can't conclude, with Sartre, that the question it frames is 'no longer a meaning but a substance'.<sup>2</sup> For this false question shares several common traits with the ordinary acts of language. It not only obeys the laws of syntax but also follows the everyday rhetorical use of interrogative and exclamative propositions, particularly prevalent in the religious rhetoric that so marked Rimbaud: 'Who among us is without sin?' 'Let he among you who is without sin throw the first stone!' If poetry turns its back on ordinary communication, it is not through an intransitive use of language that cancels out meaning. It is through operating a junction between two regimes of meaning: on the one hand, 'What soul is without flaw?' is an 'ordinary' phrase, in its place in a poem that takes the form of an examination of conscience. But also, in the echo it provides to 'O seasons, o châteaux!', it is a riddle-phrase: a 'silly refrain', like those of nursery rhymes and popular songs, but also the 'sound of a violin' played by someone who 'witnesses' the blossoming of his thought, the emergence, within the worn phrases of language and the meaningless rocking of nursery rhymes, of this *unknown quantity* that is called on to make a new sense and rhythm out of collective life.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

The singularity of Rimbaud's line does not, then, stem from some specific, anticomcommunicational use of language. It stems from a new relationship between the distinctive and the indistinctive, the proper and the improper, the poetic and the prosaic. The historic distinctiveness of literature is not due to a state or specific use of language. It is due to a new balance of the powers of language, to a new way language can act by causing something to be seen and heard. Literature, in short, is a new system of identification of the art of writing. A system of identification of an art is a system of relationships between practices, the forms of visibility of such practices, and modes of intelligibility. So it is a certain way of intervening in the sharing of the perceptible that defines the world we live in: the way in which the world is visible for us, and in which what is visible can be put into words, and the capacities and incapacities that reveal themselves accordingly. It is on this basis that it is possible to theorize about the politics of literature 'as such', its mode of intervention in the carving up of objects that form a common world, the subjects that people that world and the powers they have to see it, name it and act upon it.

How can we characterize this system of identification peculiar to literature and its politics? To approach the question, we might tackle two political readings of the same author, seen as an exemplary representative of the literary autonomy that removes literature from any form of extrinsic significance and any political or social use. In *What is Literature?*, Sartre made Flaubert the champion of an aristocratic assault on the democratic nature of prosaic language. This assault, according to Sartre, took the form of a petrification of language:

Flaubert writes to do away with people and things. The Flaubertian sentence circles the object, catches it, immobilizes it and cripples it, closes over it, then turns it to stone and petrifies it along with itself.<sup>3</sup>

Sartre saw this petrification as the contribution of the champions of pure literature to the strategy of the bourgeoisie. Flaubert, Mallarmé and their colleagues claimed to reject the bourgeois way of

<sup>3</sup> Sartre, *What is Literature?*, pp. 113–14.

thinking and dreamed of a new aristocracy, living in a world of purified words conceived as a secret garden of precious stones and flowers. But this secret garden was only an ideal projection of prosaic property. To build it, those writers had to remove words from their communicative use and thereby tear them away from anyone wanting to use them as tools of political debate and social struggle. The literary petrification of words and objects served, then, in its own way, the nihilist strategy of a bourgeoisie that had seen its death announced on the barricades of June 1848 in Paris and was seeking to ward off its fate by putting the brakes on the historic forces it had unleashed.

If this analysis merits our interest, it is because it reworks an interpretative schema already used by Flaubert's contemporaries. The latter had picked up in Flaubert's prose the fascination for detail and indifference to the human significance of actions and characters that made Flaubert give material things just as much weight as he gave human beings. Barbey d'Aurevilly summed up their criticism when he said that Flaubert shovelled phrases in front of him the way a builder's labourer shovelled stones into a wheelbarrow. So, all those critics already concurred in characterizing Flaubert's prose as an endeavour to petrify human speech and action, and to see this petrification, as Sartre later would, as a political symptom. But they also concurred in understanding this symptom the other way round to Sartre. Very far from being a weapon of antidemocratic assault, the 'petrification' of language was, for them, the trademark of democracy. It went hand in hand with the democratism that animated the novelist's whole enterprise. Flaubert made all words equal just as he suppressed any hierarchy between worthy subjects and unworthy subjects, between narration and description, foreground and background, and ultimately, between men and things. He most certainly banished all political engagement by treating democrats and conservatives with equal contempt. For Flaubert, the writer had to be wary of trying to prove anything. But this indifference to any message was, for Flaubert's critics, the very mark of democracy which, for them, meant the regime of generalized indifference, the equal possibility of being democratic, antidemocratic or indifferent to democracy. Whatever Flaubert's feelings about the people and the Republic may have been, his prose was democratic. It was the very embodiment of democracy.

Sartre is certainly not the first person to turn a reactionary argument into a progressive one. The 'political' and 'social' interpretations by means of which the critics of the twentieth century tried to illuminate the literature of the nineteenth essentially take up, against the bourgeois novel, the analyses and arguments of those nostalgics who hankered after the monarchical and representative order. We might find this phenomenon amusing. But we would do better to try to understand the reasons behind the move. To do so, we need to reconstruct the logic that assigns, to a certain practice of writing, a political significance that is itself likely to be read in two opposing ways. So, we need to define the relationship between three things: a way of writing that tends to remove meanings; a way of reading that sees this withdrawal of sense as a symptom; and, finally, the possibility of interpreting the political significance of such a symptom in ways that are opposed. The indifference of writing, the practice of symptomatic reading and the ambivalence of this practice are part and parcel of the same mechanism. And this mechanism could well be literature itself – literature as a historic system of identification of the art of writing, as a specific nexus between a system of meaning of words and a system of visibility of things.

This is where the historic novelty introduced by the term 'literature' lies: not in a particular language but in a new way of linking the sayable and the visible, words and things. This is what was at stake in the attack mounted by the champions of classic belles-lettres on Flaubert, but also on all the artisans of the new practice of the art of writing known as literature. These innovators had, the critics said, lost the sense of human action and significance. That was a way of saying that they had lost the sense of a certain sort of action and a certain way of linking action and significance. To understand what this lost sense was, we have to remember the old Aristotelian principle that underpinned the classical order of representation. Poetry, according to Aristotle, is not defined by a specific use of language. It is defined by fiction. And fiction is the imitation of men who act. This apparently simple principle in fact defined a certain politics of the poem. It actually set the causal rationality of action against the empirical nature of life. The superiority of the poem, which links actions, over history, which narrates the succession of deeds, was homologous to the superiority of men who take part in the world of action over those who are

confined to the world of life, that is, to pure reproduction of existence. In keeping with this hierarchy, fiction was divided into genres. There were noble genres, devoted to the depiction of elevated actions and characters, and low genres, devoted to the histories of people of modest means – the little people. The hierarchy of genres also subjected style to a principle of appropriateness: kings were supposed to talk like kings and commoners like commoners. This set of norms defined a lot more than an academic constraint. It tied the rationality of poetic fiction to a certain form of intelligibility of human action, to a certain kind of affinity between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of speaking.

The ‘petrification’ of language, the loss of the sense of human action and significance, meant the dismantling of this poetic hierarchy in harmony with a whole world order. The most visible aspect of this dismantling was the suppression of any hierarchy between subjects and characters, of any principle of harmony between a style and a subject or character. The principle of such a revolution, formulated at the dawn of the nineteenth century in the preface to Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, happens to have been taken by Flaubert to its logical conclusion. There are no beautiful subjects or vile subjects anymore. This does not simply mean, as it does in Wordsworth, that the emotions of simple folk are as susceptible to poetry as those of ‘great souls’. It means, more radically, that there is no subject at all, that the combination of actions and the expression of thoughts and feelings, which made up the kernel of the poetic composition, are in themselves indifferent. What makes the texture of the work is style, which is ‘an absolute way of seeing things’. The critics of the age of Sartre tried to identify this ‘absolutization of style’ as an aristocratic aestheticism. But Flaubert’s contemporaries were not fooled by such an ‘absolute’: it did not mean sublime elevation but, on the contrary, dissolution of all order. Raising style as an absolute meant firstly pulling down all the hierarchies that had governed the invention of subjects, the composition of action and the appropriateness of expression. Even the declarations of the art for art’s sake movement had to be read as a formula for a radical egalitarianism. That formula not only overturned the rules of the poetic arts. It overturned a whole world order, a whole system of relationships between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of



saying. The absolutization of style was the literary formula for the democratic principle of equality. It chimed with the destruction of the old superiority of action over life and with the social and political promotion of ordinary human beings, beings dedicated to the repetition and reproduction of unadorned life.

It remains to be seen how we think this democratic ‘promotion’ of ordinary lives correlated to the ‘indifference’ of literature. Flaubert’s critics turned it into a doctrine. Democracy, for them, broke down into two things: a system of government, in which they saw a self-destructive utopia; but also a ‘social influence’, a way of being for society characterized by the levelling of the conditions and ways of being and of feeling. If political democracy was doomed to die from its utopia, that social process, on the other hand, could not be countered – it could at most only be contained and directed by the wellborn – and it couldn’t fail to set its mark on the written word. This, what’s more, is why the critics did not get bogged down correcting Flaubert, as Voltaire did with Corneille when he pointed out which subjects Corneille ought to have chosen and how he should have dealt with them. On the contrary, the critics explained to their readers why Flaubert was doomed to choose the subjects he chose and to treat them the way he did. They protested in the name of lost values, but their protest was itself expressed within the framework of the new paradigm which turned literature into an ‘expression of society’, the action of impersonal forces eluding authors’ intentions. But perhaps their fatalism as wellborn men facing the ‘torrent of democracy’ hid from them the more complex dialectic involved in this notion of literature as the expression of society. The global reference to a state of society effectively hides the tension that at once unites and opposes the democratic principle to the exercise of a new regime of expression.

For democracy does not in itself determine any particular regime of expression. It breaks, rather, any determined logic of connection between expression and its content. The principle of democracy is not the levelling – real or assumed – of social conditions. It is not a social condition but a symbolic break: a break with a determined order of relationships between bodies and words, between ways of speaking, ways of doing and ways of being. In this sense, we can oppose ‘literary democracy’ to the classical order of representation. The latter linked a certain idea