

BOOK REVIEWS

THE IGNORANT SCHOOLMASTER: FIVE LESSONS IN INTELLECTUAL EMANCIPATION

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Author: Jacques Rancière,
translated and with an introduction by
Kristin Ross

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This book tells the story of Joseph Jacotot, a lecturer in French literature at the University of Louvain (Leuven) in the early nineteenth century. Jacotot's 'intellectual adventure' began with an obligation to teach French to Flemish students, whose language he did not share. Rancière tells us that Jacotot assayed a small 'philosophical experiment' (p. 2), the success of which was to yield a pedagogical-philosophical framework that posed a serious challenge to established 'truths' about the nature of teaching and learning.

Without a language in common, Jacotot sought a link between 'master' and pupils and found it in a Flemish–French bilingual edition of *Télémaque* by François Fénelon, which he gave to his students. He then tested them on their understanding of French, later setting them written tasks in French. The results exceeded all his expectations. With no common language, Jacotot was deprived of the ability to explicate the material for his students, so they had, through their own effort and will, begun to learn the language. From this, Jacotot came to the radical conclusion that explication was not the solution to the 'problem' of learning, but the very source of that problem, hypostatizing the relation of inequality between master and pupils.

'... [E]xplication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of the world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones ...' (p. 6). This conclusion provided the foundation for the 'lessons in intellectual emancipation' 'taught' by Jacotot, and

Rancière, in what the latter declares to be a narrative interpretation of the former's work. For fittingly, as Kristin Ross suggests, this is not an 'explication' by Rancière of Jacotot's texts but 'an act of storytelling', presuming 'an equality of intelligence' between interlocutors, rather than 'an inequality of knowledge' between superior explicator and inferior receiver of that explication (p. xxii). What matters instead is will; the master's task is no more than to set the conditions in which that will may best be exercised, and to verify the results of the students' study as the outcomes of serious attention to the task.

Upon this base, Jacotot, according to Rancière, elaborated on the principle of 'universal teaching', i.e. all students can learn, and all teachers can teach, anything. A peasant being illiterate does not mean that he cannot teach his son to read. What is important is that the father can verify that his son has given his full attention, and that consequently he has sought to eliminate errors in the process. 'Man [sic] is a will served by intelligence,' wrote Jacotot; and Rancière continues: 'it is the lack of will that causes intelligence to make mistakes. The mind's original sin is not haste, but distraction, absence' (p. 55).

One can see Rancière's emancipatory, egalitarian trajectory. As Ross writes, the context of Rancière's intervention was the cultural-political environment of post-1968 France. Pierre Bourdieu, in the process of identifying the cultural

capital and habitus that perpetuated the hegemony of the bourgeoisie/intellectual over the working class, served only, according to Rancière, to affirm that perpetuation. By giving primacy to will over intelligence, Rancière – through Jacotot – seeks to abolish the prevalence of hierarchies in determining intelligence, fixing upon that which is common to all and essential to our capacity to grow, learn and know ourselves as fully emancipated individuals. 'The virtue of our intelligence is less in knowing than in doing ... But this doing is fundamentally an act of communication' (p. 65).

Rancière, like Gramsci and Freire, was concerned with giving due recognition to the work and intellectual capacity of those who occupied subaltern positions in society. He also drew upon the philosophical resources of Sartre and Marcuse's existentialism. For Rancière, 'Man [sic] thinks because he exists' (p. 62), and thinking, therefore, is not a special category of activity attainable only by those who, in the process of gaining the 'superior' power of thought, then deny it to those 'inferior' to them. Rather, thinking is something that we do, and through expression – through acts of 'translation and counter-translation' (p. 69) such as those being carried out by Rancière himself in relation to the words of Joseph Jacotot – we come to an understanding between equals. This, for me, is the main 'lesson' of this book, and the reason I find it valuable. ■