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Yves Citton

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TWO

"The Ignorant Schoolmaster": knowledge and authority

Yves Citton

Few endeavours could appear more self-contradictory (and self-defeating) than an attempt to *explain* the argument developed by Jacques Rancière in his 1987 book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (subtitled *Five Lessons on Intellectual Emancipation*, English translation 1991). The main assertion repeated in this remarkably subtle praise of equality is that the most perverse form of oppression and subjection is located in the very act of explaining. Most of us tend to take for granted that giving explanations – and what is teaching but “giving explanations”? – is a noble act of generosity and emancipation through which the explainer raises the explainee to a higher level of knowledge and understanding. I have spent a good amount of time reading, analyzing, discussing and teaching *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* over the last decades; I am eager to help more people discover and enjoy its power and its beauty. I hear people say that Rancière is not an easy philosopher to understand, and that his theory of emancipation is not an easy argument to grasp; therefore I am about to explain the main notions, assumptions and consequences of this book, as well as its charms and its stakes. But since the main lesson of the book is that explanation runs contrary to emancipation, I – along with my fellow contributors to a volume dedicated to “explaining” Rancière’s key concepts – seem bound to betray the author and his ideas by the very nature of our explanatory gesture.

The paradox goes further. The anti-explanatory message advocated by *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is carried out through the explanation of someone else’s theories: Rancière has recovered the writings of a certain Joseph Jacotot (who first discovered that explanation runs contrary to emancipation), and he explains what Jacotot wrote in his theoretical

works. A closer look, however, will reveal that, rather than “explaining” Jacotot’s theory, Rancière *rewrites* it. This chapter may therefore not be so self-contradictory (nor self-defeating) in its attempt to rewrite Rancière’s rewriting of Jacotot.

Joseph Jacotot’s reversal of the explanatory model

While presenting Rancière as a philosopher is not inappropriate (for he is a great inventor of concepts), it tends nevertheless to downplay two essential features of his interventions in the philosophical field: their frailty and their literariness. In this regard, none of his books is more *tentative* than *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*: it is experimental (it resembles a thought-experiment), provisional (it sketches a theory still awaiting its full development), conceptually fragile, and argumentatively problematic (it thrives on a paradox). While Rancière has written a great deal about literature during his later career, rarely has he been as literary as in this early book, which takes the form of a narrative (the narrative of “an intellectual adventure”) as much as that of a philosophical argument. Let us first survey its plot, centred on its protagonist, Joseph Jacotot.

Once upon a time, there was a teacher (who had previously been a soldier, an administrator and a deputy) who was exiled from France after the Restoration of Monarchy in 1815, and who became a lecturer in French literature at the University of Louvain in the Netherlands. Faced with students who did not speak French, and unable to speak Flemish himself, Jacotot came up with a practical fix: he handed his students a bilingual version of Fénelon’s masterpiece *Télémaque* (one of the most widely read and admired didactic novels of the eighteenth century), and told them to learn French by figuring out this text in its original language with the help of the Flemish translation. This practical fix was the start of a philosophical experiment leading to an intellectual revolution: to Jacotot’s surprise, the students soon managed – so we are told at least – to master enough of Fénelon’s language to write essays (in French) about the book, achieving a very decent level of written expression. On the foundation provided by the fact that his students had managed to learn French without any form of explanation, Jacotot started building a radical reformation of all pedagogical methods under the title of “Universal Teaching” [*Enseignement universel*], later renamed “the panecastic system”.

Such a reformation had a premise: every human being must necessarily be capable of learning by himself (through trial and error, guesses and

self-correction), since this is how all of us learned our mother tongue. And since this is how we learned our first language, why could we not learn a second language in the same way? Beyond languages, why couldn't we learn piano or painting in the same fashion? Or mathematics, or chemistry, or economics?

It also had a far-reaching implication: the teacher's main function is not to transmit content (to give his knowledge to the ignorant pupils), but to drive the students' will. Indeed, the figure of the teacher was not to be dispensed with along this path of reformation: Jacotot *was* instrumental in the process that led this group of students to learn a language they did not originally know. However, the part he played in the process was not the one typically defined by the Old Testament of pedagogical theory, which Jacotot and Rancière simply refer to as "the Old Master" (or rather, in the French original, as "the Old Lady": *la Vieille*). In Jacotot's practice, the teacher's role was limited to *influencing the will*, and did not include any actual transfer of knowledge. His pedagogical act was not an explication (of the rules of French grammar), but a series of commands: "Read this book! Pay attention to these words!" If the Good News brought to mankind by the apostle Jacotot was that every child of man is intelligent enough to learn anything without the help of an explicator, the reformed Gospel of Universal Teaching was not meant to put all teachers out of a job: it tended only to recast them as Commanders instead of Explainers.

This implication, however, had a surprising but important corollary. Since a teacher did not need to (be able to) *explain* the content of the course, the teacher did not need to *know* nor *understand* what he was teaching. After having "taught" French (which he knew), Jacotot decided to teach piano or chemistry (in which he had no competence whatsoever). And it worked – or so we are told. A perfectly ignorant schoolmaster can teach a discipline that he has not mastered himself, since his role in the educational process is not to provide any specific content, but mainly to mobilize the learners' will. Hence the disturbing reversal of values suggested by Rancière's title. Far from naming and denouncing the disgrace of an impostor, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* soon rings as a promise: there may be a blessed day of Intellectual Emancipation when "ignorant" people will be recognized as perfectly qualified schoolmasters; a day when children of human beings will have realized that they are intelligent enough to learn by themselves, without the need for any (superior) explicator, only with the commanding help (and encouragement) of their ignorant brothers.

A second, and even more disturbing, corollary followed: if the act of explication was in no way necessary to ensure proper learning, it did

nevertheless fulfil a very important function in the process of socialization, by teaching the students that they were ignorant, incapable of escaping ignorance by their own means. For here is Jacotot's (and Rancière's) most subversive assertion: the true (if unconscious) function of all the generous, altruistic, philanthropic, enlightened and enlightening providers of explications is to instil a sense of inequality deep into the minds and souls of all the children of the Republic. These children all had the original experience of learning (their mother tongue, as well as most "life lessons") by themselves. They all spontaneously acted upon that premise of an equality of intelligence (according to which all of us are able to figure out, by trial and error, what we need to know in order to master the codes that surround and structure us). In light of this original experience, the School (the educational system, the Old Master, *la Vieille*, with its pedagogical practices and its armies of well-meaning Teachers, Instructors, Masters and Professors) appears as a tremendous machine devoted to neutralizing that spontaneous power to learn by oneself. The true (if untold) content of the teacher's explication has nothing to do with French grammar, fingering techniques on the piano or molecular interactions in chemistry: it is a monotonous chorus repeating, class after class: "You do not know how to learn", "You need me, ie. my (superior) explications, in order properly to learn what you are learning". Against the practical evidence of the equality of all intelligences, as demonstrated by the mastery of our mother tongue, the very structure of the (modern) School, with its emphasis on the act of explaining, works as the most powerful machine of indoctrination geared towards convincing us of the incapacity (you cannot learn by yourself) and inequality (some are knowledgeable, others are ignorant) of our intelligence.

Jacotot's reversal of the explanatory model thus leads to a drastic and highly discomforting indictment of the progressive educator's best intents: far from promoting equality by raising the (formerly) ignorant pupil to the higher status of an enabled knower, the act of transmitting knowledge through explication tends to generate and perpetuate a structure of inequality between the explainer and the explainee. Far from being reduced by the act of explanation, this structure of inequality is (re-)enforced each time the educator reasserts his superiority by performing as a knowledge-provider. Far from contributing to the pupil's emancipation, the explanatory model is to be seen as a dramatic source of "stultification" (*abrutissement*). Jacotot's argument, closely followed by Rancière's rewriting, precisely defines stultification as inherent to any relation in which "one intelligence is subordinated to another", while, on the contrary, the possibility of emancipation rests

on maintaining a clear difference between the equality of intelligence and the possible subordination of the will. In Jacotot's *Universal Teaching*, "the act of an intelligence obey[s] only itself, while the will obeys another will" (IS 13).

From a pedagogical experiment to its political implications

Beyond the special case of classroom interactions and of teachers' explications, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* contains in a nutshell one of Rancière's most fundamental and obstinate political assertions – the definition of politics as the verification of the presupposition of the equality of intelligence. The political implications of Jacotot's gesture can be traced on at least three levels.

First, they lead us to question the political uses of expertise. Since Plato's *Republic* (a constant punch ball in Rancière's political reflection), "those who know" (theologians, philosophers, economists, and all of their fellow-experts) have claimed the right to be invested with political authority in the name of their superior knowledge. The division of labour delineated by Socrates as illustrating the essence of justice in the macroscopic case of the City demanded that each individual remain in the place and function attributed to him by an optimal distribution of specialized skills: those who are best suited for making bread should be (and remain) bakers, those best at fighting should be (and remain) soldiers, and those best at understanding how the world goes should advise the kings (or become kings themselves) (*Republic* 433a–444a). It seems common sense to admit that we would be best governed if "those who know" were put in the position of being those who decide – just as it seems commonsensical to recognize that the explicator performs a generous act of equalization when he raises his listener to a higher level of understanding by transmitting his knowledge. Yet it is against this misleadingly self-evident equation between authority and knowledge that Rancière constructed the core of his political reflection.

In showing that the explainer tends to stultify the explainee due to the structural inequality of the explanatory model, Jacotot helps us see that the expert tends to kill the democratic process because of the very position from which he pretends to enlighten it. No matter how well intended or knowledgeable he may be in his disciplinary field, the expert represents a potential threat to democratic politics in so far as his very enunciation divides the citizenry in two: those who have the knowledge (and who are entitled to command), and those who lack the knowledge (and must therefore obey). Throughout most of his books,

Rancière has constantly denounced not, of course, “those who have knowledge”, but those who let their expert knowledge become a tool for silencing the claims and resistance expressed by “the ignorant ones”. In symmetrical contradiction to Plato’s philosophy, Rancière repeats, book after book, that the endlessly subversive nature of democracy consists in accepting that “the ignorant ones” should be entitled to rule the City. His close reading of Jacotot revealed that “the ignorant person” is never defined as such by a mere lack of knowledge, but by an oppressive structure that transforms a perfectly able intellectual agent into a powerless recipient (supposed passively to absorb forms of knowledge produced for him, but never by him) – an oppressive structure that is perverse enough to masquerade its very production of “the ignorant person” as a remedy against ignorance! “What stultifies the common people is not the lack of instruction, but the belief in the inferiority of their intelligence” (IS 39). The first political lesson to be drawn from Jacotot thus consists in spotting the stultifying side-effects that never fail to accompany any discourse of expertise, in so far as it is in the nature of explication and expertise to produce the very inequality of knowledge and power it pretends to correct.

The second political implication of Rancière’s reading of Jacotot can be encapsulated in a term that has become trendy (in France) only several years after the publication of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, a term that Rancière has never really appropriated for himself but that nevertheless synthesizes a fundamental dimension of his thinking: *empowerment*. While the stultifying explicator pretends generously to give something that is lacking in “the ignorant person” (knowledge, understanding), the empowering emancipator mainly purports to reveal a power (to understand) that is already present in the agent – even though it may not be accessible to him without the mediation of the emancipator. The problem, in education, is not to transmit knowledge: “the problem is to reveal an intelligence to itself” (IS: 28). Jacotot’s pupils had it within themselves to learn (Fénelon’s French) by themselves: the schoolteacher only provided an opportunity (a context, a situation, a framing structure) through which their power to learn found the chance to be actualized.

In this radical conception, empowerment consists not in a transmission of power (which would imply and would in fact produce an inequality of status between the giver and the receiver), but in the realization–actualization of a power whose source is located within the agent himself. All human children have the power to learn their mother tongue (and any other language) without the assistance of an explicator. The intervention of such an explicator, far from helping them to learn,

“teaches” them that they are incapable of learning by themselves (it “stultifies” them; it constitutes them as “ignorant”). The emancipator’s role, therefore, does not consist in providing the agents with anything they lack (knowledge, understanding, intelligence, power), but simply in helping them remove the obstacles that separate them from their own power. Emancipation, as we already saw, concerns the will (rather than knowledge or intelligence). Its main message fits perfectly with the motto of empowerment politics: You already have the power; all you need is the will to use it for your own (common) good.

Slogans modelled on the “Yes, you can!” pattern can be both emancipatory and oppressive. Their empowering nature is often counter-balanced by an ideology of free will and unconditioned choice, which tends to blame the victims’ fate on their lack of “will power”, rather than on the situation that conditioned their choices. Few situations can be escaped by the mere will to *just do it!* “Universal teaching is not the key to success granted to the enterprising who explore the prodigious powers of the will. Nothing could be more opposed to the thought of emancipation than that advertising slogan” (IS 56). Politics, as Rancière defines it, consists in producing or in exploiting the practical conditions (context, situation, structural framework) that will solicit the agent’s will to use the power at his disposal. When Rancière presents politics as a process of subjectification, he undermines in advance any appeal to a will that would be unconditioned, that is “free” to have “just done” something if only the agent had made “the right choice”. His historical research in the nineteenth-century archives of the labour movement as well as in Jacotot’s pedagogical enterprise describe and analyse socio-historical conditions that have allowed for a process of emancipatory subjectification to take place (i.e. for a certain type of will to be produced within a certain type of collective structure).

Hence the third main political lesson to be drawn from *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*: because it consists mainly in processes of subjectification, democratic politics revolves around the practical verification of the presupposition of the equality of intelligence. Since this principle is located at the very core of Jacques Rancière’s philosophy, its complex articulation needs to be spelled out with some care and patience, in at least five different steps.

- (a) The basic assertion is a “principle of equality of all speaking beings” (IS 39): “everyone is of equal intelligence” (IS 101). If one can define “man as a will served by an intelligence” (IS 51), one should immediately add that, although there may be “inequality in the *manifestations* of intelligence ... there is no hierarchy of

intellectual capacity” (IS 27). All of Rancière’s writings amount to a persistent and deepening reflection on equality in general, political equality in particular, with the principle of equality of intelligence as its foundation – a foundation drawn from his study of Jacotot’s intellectual adventure.

- (b) The equality of intelligence, however, can never be observed as such. “We can never say: all intelligence is equal” (IS 46): phenol-ogists, neurobiologists, schoolmasters and other IQ-test designers will always find ways to measure something resembling intellectual capacity, and to rank the manifestations of intelligence according to the particular scale they happen to promote. This may be the reason why most progressive political agendas have tended to present equality as a goal (generally a never-fully achievable goal) for the future, rather than as a premise on which to build an egalitarian society.
- (c) This postponement of equality into a never-fully-achievable future constitutes the main trap of progressive politics Rancière has constantly denounced throughout his writings. Jacotot’s (anti-)model of the explicator offers the blueprint for all such postponers of equality. Their common motto is: Accept to submit your (lower) intelligence to my (higher) understanding today, in order to be my equal tomorrow! Because it is based upon the principle of inequality of intelligence, this falsely emancipating (but actually stultifying) attitude, which has permeated most forms of modern progressive politics, defeats its stated purpose by relying on (and by perpetuating) the very inequality it pretends to abolish.
- (d) Since the equality of intelligence cannot be observed as such in its given manifestations, nor postponed as a goal only to be attained in the future, it has to be considered as a premise to egalitarian politics, a premise that needs to operate as a presupposition. Equality is “not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a *supposition* to maintain in every circumstance” (IS 138). The only truly emancipatory processes of subjectification that took place in modern history have received their dynamics from such a presupposition of equality of intelligence. Their slogans have been structured in the form of a “Yes, we already can”, rather than as a “One day we will be able to”. Their power has relied on the intuition that “We can” because we, as speaking beings, must declare and consider ourselves equal in intelligence to those deemed superior. This, in turn, has resulted from a self-declaration that has the form of a presupposition rooted in the will, rather than of an objective form of knowledge based on the collection of positive evidence.

(e) Democratic politics will therefore consist in the practical verification of such a presupposition. “Equality is not a given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is *verified*”; it will “never exist except in its verification and at the price of being verified always and everywhere” (IS 137–8). Since the equality of intelligence cannot be observed in its given manifestations, “we are reduced to multiplying the experiments inspired by that opinion” (IS 46). However, the self-emancipating agents might say, “our problem isn’t proving that all intelligence is equal. It is seeing what can be done under that supposition” (*ibid.*). The presupposition has no worth in itself: its value is strictly limited to its effects, that is, to the practical experimentations produced by its attempted verifications. Contrary to the explicator’s postponing device, the very structure of such verifications actually implements the equality they aim to foster: “for the only verified intelligence is the one that speaks to a fellow-man capable of verifying the equality of their intelligence” (IS 39).

Jacotot’s practical experimentations (and theoretical reflections) in the field of pedagogy thus provided Rancière with a neat and original definition of democratic politics: to qualify as democratic, political agency must set in motion or fuel a practical verification of the equality of intelligence, that is, a process of subjectification through which all participating agents are empowered to find out for themselves how their conditions of living can be improved. By contrast, this definition raises suspicion towards the best-intentioned efforts through which progressively minded intellectuals (or parties) “explain” to the masses what is in their best interest from a superior position of expertise or scientificity.

As Kristin Ross skilfully showed in the introduction to her English translation of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (IS IX–XII), the book used Jacotot indirectly but sharply to criticize scientist attitudes that dominated a large spectrum of the French intelligentsia, from the remaining followers of Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu to the neo-positivism of (ex)-socialists converted to the laws of free-market capitalism (on the contrasts and parallels between Rancière and Bourdieu, see Nordmann 2007 and Pelletier 2009a and b). Rancière’s intervention contributed to introducing a wedge within the left field of modern politics. From the early Enlightenmenters plotting the education of the masses, to the Marxist philosophers denouncing the illusions of “ideology” in the name of materialist “science”, and all the way to the late twentieth-century sociologists theorizing the necessary “ignorance” of the social agent,

all political projects explicitly geared towards the ideal of equality had to be reassessed in the new light shed by the long-forgotten Universal Teaching promoted in the 1820s by Joseph Jacotot. And, under this discriminating light, many emancipatory projects appear betrayed by large segments of an

intellectual hierarchy that has no other power except the rationalization of inequality. Progressivism is the modern form of that power, purified of any mixture with the material forms of traditional authority: progressive have *no power other* than that ignorance, that incapacity of the people on which their priesthood is based. How, without opening up an abyss under their own feet, can they say to working people that they don't need them in order to be free men, in order to be educated in everything suitable to their dignity as men? (IS 129)

From the contradictions of the explicator to the paradox of the spectator

If Rancière managed to operate such a theoretical tour de force in exhuming Jacotot's obscure writings, it is largely due to the literary devices he crafted to compose *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. As Kristin Ross also notes, the reader of this highly sympathetic narrative of Jacotot's life and legend can hardly distinguish the moments when Rancière speaks for himself from the pages where he merely lends his voice to his protagonist (IS XXII). His most daring assertions are often prudently hidden behind the outrageous statements of the pedagogue; in return, tongue-in-cheek irony towards the provocative lunacy of the schoolmaster's claims pushes the reader to imagine Rancière himself smiling at the disturbingly radical and deliciously counter-intuitive positions he is led to defend in his effort to give an advantageous account of the doctrine of Universal Teaching. Far from trying to assess the "true value" (and limits) of Jacotot's theses, far from raising the numerous objections that jump to mind in the face of his declarations, Rancière adopts the posture of a humble advocate, espousing their logic as closely as possible, defending them as his own – even (or rather especially) in their most extreme and outrageous implications.

Such literary devices provide the narrow door that allows Rancière to escape what initially appeared to be a constitutive contradiction of his book: the account he provides of Jacotot's anti-explanatory system is in no way "an explication" of Jacotot's writings. Even though he often

situates Jacotot within the intellectual debates of the early nineteenth century (bringing in quotes from Bonald, Maine de Biran, Destutt de Tracy, Lamennais), Rancière never attempts to second-guess Jacotot in “explaining” his behaviour and his assertions in causal terms, from a position of superiority towards the text. His presentation of Universal Teaching does not “explain” the doctrine, but merely rewrites it (by editing it, reassembling it, summarizing it, paraphrasing it) into a language that makes sense at the turn of the twenty-first century. Or rather, Rancière’s gesture consists in translating Jacotot’s writings into the vocabulary and framing of our own current problems and debates (with Althusser, Bourdieu, the economists and other advocates of political expertise). In doing so, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* provides the most convincing example of an interpretation that endows an old book simultaneously with a renewal, a presentification and an actualization (Citton 2007).

Far from betraying the anti-explicator’s message by an explication of his doctrine, Rancière remains deeply true to the founding experience on which Jacotot built his Universal Teaching. For the first success of the “panecastic system” consisted in a process of translation that took place between the Flemish pupils and Fénelon’s French novel. As we recall, “everything had perforce been played out between the intelligence of Fénelon who had wanted to make a particular use of the French language, the intelligence of the translator who had wanted to give a Flemish equivalent, and the intelligence of the apprentices who wanted to learn French” (IS 9). In his gesture of situating himself on the same level (of advocacy) as Jacotot and of merging his translating voice into that of the nineteenth-century author, Rancière enacts one of the most important panecastic lessons, which therefore applies equally well to his relation to us as it applies to Jacotot’s relation to his pupils:

without thinking about it, he had made them discover this thing that he discovered with them: that all sentences, and consequently all the intelligences that produce them, are of the same nature. Understanding is never more than translating, that IS: giving the equivalent of a text, but in no way its reason. There is nothing behind the written page, no false bottom that necessitates the work of an other intelligence, that of the explicator; no language of the master, no language of the language whose words and sentences are able to speak the reason of the words and sentences of a text. The Flemish students had furnished the proof: to speak about *Télémaque*, they had at their disposition only the words of *Télémaque*. Fénelon’s sentences alone are necessary

to understand Fénelon's sentences and to express what one has understood about them. Learning and understanding are two ways of expressing the same act of translation. (IS 9)

Such an act of translation – in its etymological sense of “displacement” – has been pursued by Rancière long after the publication of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Not only did he devote the two following decades to deepening and sharpening his reflection on the politics of equality, but he recently returned to the lessons of intellectual emancipation sketched by Jacotot in order to redefine the relation between politics and the arts in his 2008 book, *The Emancipated Spectator* (English translation 2009). In this case, the displacement consisted in applying to the spectator and to the aesthetic experience provided in a theatre, a cinema, a museum, or at home in front of a television, the same presupposition of the equality of intelligence applied by Jacotot to his pupils in his Louvain classroom. The result of this further act of translation overturns two premises that are almost universally accepted in the current reflection on contemporary art. In reference to Denis Diderot's famous 1778 text entitled *The Paradox of the Comedian*, Rancière wrote *The Paradox of the Spectator* in order to debunk a double indictment frequently addressed to the traditional role of the audience.

First, as long as he sits in the darkness, watching the performance presented on the stage, the spectator is conceived as a passive being, whom countless scenographic devices, throughout the twentieth century, have desperately tried to “activate” (by blurring “the fourth wall” separating the stage from the audience, by exposing or unsettling him, by performing obscene acts supposed to raise his indignation, his outrage or any other form of (re)active participation). Secondly, all of the most significant currents in modern art, from Berthold Brecht and Antonin Artaud to the many reincarnations of agit-prop and “happenings”, have attempted to pull the spectator out of his position of a watcher, who would return to his normal (and “real”) life after the brief parenthesis of an entertaining or thought-provoking show, in order to push him to become a doer, most frequently a revolutionary agent geared up to take over the local Winter Palace.

On these two basic points, Rancière goes back to the lessons he drew from Jacotot in order to propose two drastic reversals. He first invites us to recognize in the spectator the same active power of intelligence that Jacotot revealed in his pupils: watching a show is in itself a form of (interpretive) activity, which triggers countless operations of attention, selection, retention, anticipation, retrospection, translation, adaptation and so on. He then suggests that a good number of modern artists (and

art theorists) have indeed put themselves in the highly questionable position of the Explicator (i.e. of the Stultifier) by the very gesture through which they pretended to play the role of Emancipator. Many forms of “revolutionary” art – if not most of them – have treated their spectator with the type of condescendence Jacotot denounced in the explanatory system of *la Vieille*. Not only did the much-reviled apologists of Socialist Realism (in its multiple avatars) pretend to “explain” to the people what it ought to understand in Art and in Society, but the avant garde itself, because of the very wedge it introduced between the enlightened appreciators and the “ignorant” masses, ended up portraying the vast majority of the spectators as passive and powerless fools, endlessly numbed by the “Society of the Spectacle”. Such attitudes reproduced the stultifying division between those who have Knowledge and Authority (in the arts) and those who lack the power to understand and make proper (aesthetic) judgements.

Presupposing the equality of intelligence, in this particular case, leads us to presuppose an intelligence at work in each spectator: the types, levels, intensities, qualities, and therefore the value of the operations generated by an aesthetic experience can obviously vary widely from the most conventional soap opera to the most transgressive theatre performance, but a truly emancipatory conception of the arts must recognize in each spectator of any genre of show an active translator who can – and more importantly still, who does – find for herself a meaningful and self-creative appropriation of the material presented to her.

“Understanding is never more than translating, that is: giving the equivalent of a text”: understanding a work of art, understanding a book, understanding *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, does not consist in explaining it from a position of superior knowledge and authority, but in translating it, in appropriating it within an activity of (self- as well as social) transformation that constantly *rewrites* the book according to the ever-changing demands of new situations. It could be said that Rancière has constantly rewritten Jacotot’s tale and legend in his later publications on politics and aesthetics. It is up to our equally intelligent (though ever biased) readings to constantly rewrite his books according to our current needs and desires for emancipation.