Jacques Rancière

The Ignorant Schoolmaster//1987

An Intellectual Adventure

[...] Among those who wanted to avail themselves of him were a good number of students who did not speak French; but Joseph Jacotot knew no Flemish. There was thus no language in which he could teach them what they sought from him. Yet he wanted to respond to their wishes. To do so, the minimal link of a thing in common had to be established between himself and them. At that time, a bilingual edition of Télémaque was being published in Brussels. The thing in common had been found, and Telemachus made his way into the life of Joseph Jacotot. He had the book delivered to the students and asked them, through an interpreter, to learn the French text with the help of the translation. When they had made it through the first half of the book, he had them repeat what they had learned over and over, and then told them to read through the rest of the book until they could recite it. This was a fortunate solution, but it was also, on a small scale, a philosophical experiment in the style of the ones performed during the Age of Enlightenment. And Joseph Jacotot, in 1818, remained a man of the preceding century.

But the experiment exceeded his expectations. He asked the students who had prepared as instructed to write in French what they thought about what they had read:

He expected horrendous barbarisms, or maybe a complete inability to perform. How could these young people, deprived of explanation, understand and resolve the difficulties of a language entirely new to them? No matter! He had to find out where the route opened by chance had taken them, what had been the results of that desperate empiricism. And how surprised he was to discover that the students, left to themselves, managed this difficult step as well as many French could have done! Was wanting all that was necessary for doing? Were all men virtually capable of understanding what others had done and understood?' (Félix and Victor Ratier, 'Enseignement universel: Emancipation intellectuelle', Journal de philosophie panécastique, no. 5 [1838] 155) [...]

The revelation that came to Joseph Jacotot amounts to this: the logic of the explicative system had to be overturned. Explication is not necessary to remedy an incapacity to understand. On the contrary, that very incapacity provides the structuring fiction of the explicative conception of the world. It is the explicator who needs the incapable and not the other way around; it is he who constitutes...
the incapable as such. To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself. Before being the act of the pedagogue, explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid. The explicator's special trick consists of this double inaugural gesture. On the one hand, he decrees the absolute beginning: it is only now that the act of learning will begin. On the other, having thrown a veil of ignorance over everything that is to be learned, he appoints himself to the task of lifting it. Until he came along, the child has been groping—blindly, figuring out riddles. Now he will learn. He heard words and repeated them. But now it is time to read, and he will not understand words if he doesn't understand syllables, and he won't understand syllables if he doesn't understand letters that neither the book nor his parents can make him understand—only the master's word. The pedagogical myth, we said, divides the world into two. More precisely, it divides intelligence into two. It says that there is an inferior intelligence and a superior one. The former registers perceptions by chance, retains them, interprets and repeats them empirically, within the closed circle of habit and need. This is the intelligence of the young child and the common man. The superior intelligence knows things by reason, proceeds by method, from the simple to the complex, from the part to the whole. It is this intelligence that allows the master to transmit his knowledge by adapting it to the intellectual capacities of the student and allows him to verify that the student has satisfactorily understood what he learned. Such is the principle of explication. From this point on, for Jacobot, such will be the principle of enforced stultification. [...] 

The experiment seemed to him sufficient to shed light: one can teach what one doesn't know if the student is emancipated, that is to say, if he is obliged to use his own intelligence. The master is he who encloses an intelligence in the arbitrary circle from which it can only break out by becoming necessary to itself. To emancipate an ignorant person, one must be, and one need only be, emancipated oneself, that is to say, conscious of the true power of the human mind. The ignorant person will learn by himself what the master doesn't know if the master believes he can and obliges him to realize his capacity: a circle of power homologous to the circle of powerlessness that ties the student to the explicator of the old method (to be called from now on, simply, the Old Master). But the relation of forces is very particular. The circle of powerlessness is always already there: it is the very workings of the social world, hidden in the evident difference between ignorance and science. The circle of power, on the other hand, can only take effect by being made public. But it can only appear as a tautology or an absurdity. How can the learned master ever understand that he can teach what he doesn't know as successfully as what he does know? He cannot but take that increase in intellectual power as a devaluation of his science. And the ignorant one, on his side, doesn't believe himself capable of learning by himself, still less of being able to teach another ignorant person. Those excluded from the world of intelligence themselves subscribe to the verdict of their exclusion. In short, the circle of emancipation must be begun.

Here lies the paradox. For if you think about it a little, the 'method' he was proposing is the oldest in the world, and it never stops being verified every day in all the circumstances where an individual must learn something without any means of having it explained to him. There is no one on earth who hasn't learned something by himself and without a master explicator. Let's call this way of learning 'universal teaching'. [...]

The Ignorant One's Lesson

[...] This is the first principle of universal teaching: one must learn something and relate everything else to it. [...] The Old Master would say: such and such a thing must be learned, and then this other thing and after that, this other. Selection, progression, incompleteness: these are his principles. We learn rules and elements, then apply them to some chosen reading passages, and then do some exercises based on the acquired rudiments. Then we graduate to a higher level, other rudiments, another book, other exercises, another professor. At each stage the abyss of ignorance is dug again; the professor fills it in before digging another. [...] The same nature that opens up a career in science to all minds wants a social order where the classes are separated and where individuals conform to the social state that is their destiny.

The solution to this contradiction is found in the ordered balance of instruction and moral education, the dividing up of the roles that fall to the schoolmaster and to the father of the family. Using the light of instruction, the first chases away the false ideas the child receives from his parental milieu; the second, by moral education, chases away the extravagant aspirations the schoolchild would like to extract from his young science and take back to his life condition. The father, incapable of drawing on his own experience to further his child's intellectual instruction, is, on the other hand, all-powerful in teaching him, by word and example, the virtue of remaining in his condition. The family is at once the nucleus of intellectual incapacity and the principle of ethical objectivity. [...]

Reason between Equals

[...] We know that improvisation is one of the canonical exercises of universal teaching. But it is first of all the exercise of our intelligence's leading virtue: the poetic virtue. The impossibility of our saying the truth, even when we feel it makes us speak as poets, makes us tell the story of our mind's adventures and
verify that they are understood by other adventurers, makes us communicate our feelings and see them shared by other feeling beings. Improvisation is the exercise which the human being knows himself and is confirmed in his nature as a reasonable man, that is to say, as an animal 'who makes words, figures and comparisons, to tell the story of what he thinks to those like him.' The virtue of our intelligence is less in knowing than in doing. 'Knowing is nothing, doing is everything.' But this doing is fundamentally an act of communication. And, for that, 'speaking is the best proof of the capacity to do whatever it is.' In the act of speaking, man doesn't transmit his knowledge, he makes poetry; he translates and invites others to do the same. He communicates as an artisan: as a person who handles words like tools. Man communicates through the works of his hands just as through the words of his speech: 'When man acts on mattter, the body's adventures become the story of the mind's adventures.' And the artisan's emancipation is first the regaining of that story, the consciousness that one's material activity is of the nature of discourse. He communicates as a poet: as a being who believes his thought communicable, his emotions sharable. That is why speech and the conception of all works as discourse are, according to universal teaching's logic, a prerequisite to any learning. The artisan must speak about his works in order to be emancipated; the student must speak about the art he wants to learn. 'Speaking about human works is the way to know human art.' [...] 

The Emancipator and His Monkey

The duty of Joseph Jacotin's disciples is thus simple. They must announce to everyone, in all places and all circumstances, the news, the practice: one can teach what one doesn't know. A poor and ignorant father can thus begin educating his children: something must be learned and all the rest related to it, on this principle: everyone is of equal intelligence.

They must announce this principle and devote themselves to its verification: speak to the destitute person, make him talk about what he is and what he knows; show him how to instruct his child; copy the prayer that the child knows by heart; give him the first volume of Télémaque and have him learn it by heart; respond to the demand of those who want to learn from the master of universal teaching what he doesn't know; finally, use all possible means of convincing the ignorant one of his power. A disciple in Grenoble couldn't persuade a poor and elderly woman to learn to read and write. He paid her to get her consent. She learned in five months, and now she is emancipating her grandchildren. [...] And education is like liberty: it isn't given; it's taken. [...] 

4 [François Fénelon's Télémaque (c. 1695) was one of the most popular prescribed texts for teaching in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Constructed as a continuation of Book IV of the

Odyssey, where Telemachus learns that his father Ulysses is detained on Calypso's isle, it functions as a 'pedagogical' fable, prefiguring Enlightenment ideas.] 


Jimmie Durham
Amusing Personal Anecdote//1988

I was actually taught opposites in school. That was in Arkansas, where everything is clear, in about my fifth year in school. (I think I must have been 11 years old by the European system of counting.) I had previously been taught that the correct way to say 'possum' was 'opossum,' so I imagined that we probably said 'poises,' and I listened to adults to see if I could hear that word and show off my new knowledge.

The teacher said that black was the opposite of white, sweet was the opposite of sour, and up was the opposite of down. I began to make my own list of opposites: the number one must be the opposite of the number ten, ice was the opposite of water, and birds were the opposite of snakes.

But I soon had problems, because if snakes and birds were opposite, where could I put the flying rattlesnake, which we saw every evening as the rattlesnake star? I theorized that in special circumstances things could act like their opposites. If grey is the blending of the opposites white and black then the flying rattlesnake could be seen as a grey bird. That worked out well because our most common bird was the mockingbird, which everyone knows likes to eat pokeberries to get drunk — an activity closer to snake behaviour than to bird behaviour. I said to my family, 'What is the opposite of a mockingbird?' 'A mockingbird, ha ha ha.' They didn't get it.

Much later in life some African friends made me study Marx and Engels, wherein I learned that progress is simply a matter of opposites pushing against each other. The cop pushes me, I push the cop; the cop puts me in jail where I have time to plan my next move and strengthen my resolve. My opposite, the cop, is unaware that he has played a part in my development and in the overall scheme of human liberation. I give him a superior smile, which heightens the dialectical struggle.