

Jacques Rancière

The Politics of Literature.

Cambridge: Polity Press 2011.

224 pages

\$69.95 (cloth ISBN 978-0-7456-4530-8); \$24.95 (paper ISBN 978-0-7456-4531-5)

The Brothers Karamazov is not only a superb novel but contains theological and philosophical material which arouses (holy) envy even in the most charitable theologian and philosopher. As a title, Jacques Rancière's *The Politics of Literature* can espouse a similar type of envy. While one should not judge a book by its cover (or title), it was those four words that drew me to the work and the opportunity to review it. Unlike the Jewish people who were said to accept the Torah before God even articulated its parameters ("we will do and we will obey"), I should have inquired and investigated more first before doing anything.

Rancière's work is a collection of ten nebulously linked, previously published essays translated from the French by Julie Rose (the French collection was published in 2006). The title of the book is also the title of its first chapter. The essay (and book) opens: "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" (3). Sadly, it was precisely in hope of further examining those elements that attracted me to the work. As I am a theologian espousing postcolonial, liberation, and feminist approaches to texts, drawing upon my literary background and developing work in ethics and politics, I can only be candid in acknowledging that it was a rocky beginning for this reviewer, to say the least. Yet, one plods on, cognizant that Rancière is a careful and challenging philosopher with interdisciplinary acumen. Here that acumen is displayed in his knowledge of literary works and their authors, especially French novelists, poets and thinkers like Voltaire, Balzac, Hugo, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Zola, Mallarmé, and Sartre, in addition to individual essays focusing on Tolstoy, Brecht, and Borges.

The most penetrating essay is titled "The Historian, Literature, and the Genre of Biography". In it, Rancière argues that biographical analyses of texts (especially by historians) are indispensable to uncovering their meanings and depth and to align history's dependence to a large extent on literature. He writes: "The ambiguities of bibliography... go to the heart of the very regime of writing that makes the science of history possible – literature" (182). Of this science of history, Rancière writes in "On the Battlefield: Tolstoy, Literature, History" that "The science of history is the tautology of power" (74). Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is the perfect novel to illustrate such an idea, as the mighty Napoleon is rendered human, all too human. This idea also touches upon a key element in these essays: the role of literature in not only compressing the public and the private, but its relentless restructuring of hierarchical society, equating classes, and collapsing distinctions of the life of the so-called elite and the life of the so-called masses. Such a move is imbedded of course in democracy, though its actual relationship with literature, according to Rancière, is more complex.

In his essay “Literary Misunderstandings” Rancière comments that literature “has its own politics, or rather its own metapolitics” (44). In this sense, Rancière stresses the separation of “real life” and literature, or more provocatively, that “literature is the real life that cures us of the misunderstandings of romance fiction as well as of political fiction” (45). Commenting, moreover, on Prokofiev’s change of the narrative ending of Tolstoy’s above-mentioned novel, where the Russian people seem to get the final word, but the figure of Stalin (embodied in Field Marshal Kutusov) remains the driving force, here again is Rancière: “The power exercised in the name of the science of history and of the masses necessarily feeds off the joining of forces that literature tries so hard to pull apart” (79).

Returning to Rancière’s employment of the phrase “the politics of literature”, what, precisely, does he mean? While never clearly defined in these essays, Rancière (in “The Putting to Death of Madame Bovary”) links its answer to the following questions: “What does confusing literature and life mean, exactly? What does it mean as the theme of a work of literature?” (50) Here we return to Rancière’s focus and interpretation of the politics of literature that is either excessively veiled and subtle or too often missing the most elemental and essential features. Politics and literature have each been a pawn of the other; sometimes they have united quite flagrantly; at other times, they have done so more unconsciously and unwittingly or even reluctantly. Just as no theology (contra Benedict XVI) can long avoid being political, so, too, with literature. Politics is life as public interaction and engagement, most clearly through law and government, but inseparable from all other spheres of life, where even a recluse can be deeply political. Why? Because even seclusion involves choice and the choice is one of separation from one’s fellow human beings. Wherever there is choice (or the movement to quell choice in others) there is the possibility, if not the reality, of politics. In this regard, ethics (pervaded by choice or even Lawrence Langer’s choiceless choice) cannot be avoided. While some readers may not espouse a Levinasian approach that prioritizes ethics over all other things and states, any discussion of politics avoids the term at its own unravelling (the word ethics is not in the book’s index).

Contra Rancière, it is precisely because so many novelists and poets can and have composed works of sheer beauty and grace while blinded to (or fully aware of) the tumultuous political and ethical background; the perspective of the marginalized or broken; or the life of a poor, black (or brown), often anonymous woman for whom neither words nor agency is given; that deep attention to such facts are indispensable for any study linking literature and politics. Re(consider) for example, feminist readings of biblical texts – readings such as *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children* (edited by Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell) where we read the Abrahamic narrative through Hagar’s eyes. Consider as well postcolonial literary works like Roberto Fernandez Retamar’s *Caliban And Other Essays*, or the illuminating anthology of the poetry of trauma in *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (edited by Carolyn Forché); or the many fine examinations of memoirs, plays, novels and the art of the Holocaust, as in Dorota Glowacka’s *Disappearing Traces: Holocaust Testimonials, Ethics, and Aesthetics*. This is not to argue that Rancière must eschew an apophatic approach to the politics of literature, but choosing to limit immoderately its meanings as opposed to expanding upon them is a curious, if not self-defeating, purpose.

Contra Carol Hanisch's "The Personal is Political", Rancière wants to challenge the assumption 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" (3). Perhaps, but readers should be forewarned that there is no discussion of a Mark Twain challenging the reality and structure of slavery through the interactions of Jim and Huck; or Dickens' tireless advocacy of the poor and his critiques of the legal and political frameworks that try to suck the destitute of all life, light, and hope; or more blatantly political works like Orwell's *1984*, Grossman's *Life and Fate*, or Dostoevsky's eerily brilliant novels, saturated in ethical, theological, philosophical, and yes, political tensions and themes. In fact, because Dostoevsky wrote so piercingly perfect a final novel of human nature, good and evil, embedded in crucial questions of theodicy, faith, meaning, and ethics, who could even surpass such a work in novel form? This is a type of holy envy that espouses respect and appreciation for its author. In this case, a comprehensive, politically (and ethically) engaged work bearing the title of "The Politics of Literature" still needs to be written. Rancière's essays remain useful for some as a literary and subtle philosophical reflection into key French writers along with a Tolstoy, Brecht, or Borges. Just do not seek such essays because of the book's title.

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