

JOSEPH BALLAN  
University of Chicago

THE INTELLIGENCE OF THE BOOK:  
THE RELIGIOUS STUDIES CLASSROOM AS TRANSLATION WORKSHOP

One of the factors rendering Jacques Rancière's work both singular and anomalous is the recurrence in his books of terms, such as "emancipation" and "equality," that might, despite the recent acclaim that his work on aesthetics has enjoyed, be considered stodgy or old-fashioned in contemporary theoretical circles. Better than any other book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in many ways defines the guiding thread of his oeuvre. In it he seeks to recuperate the strange and obscure figure of Jean-Joseph Jacotot, radical educator and pioneer of the method of "intellectual emancipation." Intellectual emancipation is a method based on the axiom of what Jacotot calls the "equality of intelligences," which Rancière is quick to point out does not affirm "the equal value of all manifestations of intelligence, but the self-equality of intelligence in all its manifestations."<sup>1</sup> I suspect that many educators in the field of religious studies have some notion that the recently defined space of *Religionswissenschaft* is, in comparison to the older spaces represented by faculties of theology, a space both manifesting and making possible some experience of intellectual emancipation. Emancipation here might be defined in relation to students' prejudices, or in relation to the pronouncements, declarations, and hermeneutics of traditional religious authorities, or perhaps in relation to the dogmas (such as those of neutrality) that scholarship in our relatively new field has accumulated over the decades. However it is defined, many of us think that an understanding of our work as the production and transmission of a certain kind of knowledge is not sufficient, that we need to complete this definition with an idea or ideal of emancipation that educators would share with their students.

But what is the meaning of sharing in this ideal? Does sharing amount to a unilateral action by which one person bestows upon another person something that he owns, in this case, the gift of

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<sup>1</sup> *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (New York: Verso, 2009), 10.

his liberating knowledge? Or is sharing a partaking of one person with another, in equality, of some third thing that neither owns? This vague idea of emancipation presumes that the educator is, or might be, an emancipator. All too often, these vague and seemingly benevolent notions of the political efficacy of our pedagogical work runs counter to the project of emancipation, premised as they are on the inequality between the supposedly emancipatory educator and the ignorant student. Such a relation of inequality might seem self-evident to many people inside and outside of the academy, which is precisely why Rancière speaks of a *practice* of equality. "Equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom" he writes, "or it is nothing."<sup>2</sup> To practice equality, then, is to seek out ways of living as equals (that is, ways of asserting and verifying this axiom) in a world so manifestly characterized by all kinds of (physical, social, economic) inequality.<sup>3</sup> Taking the equality of intelligences as axiomatic informs Rancière's understanding of a practice of equality, which in turn defines for him an ideal of intellectual emancipation. This paper attempts to suggest the outlines of an emancipatory pedagogy in the context of the religious studies classroom, following certain principles set forward in Rancière's work. The best place to begin this adventure<sup>4</sup> is by sketching one of the *pseudo*-emancipatory pedagogical frameworks that Rancière calls into question. Conveniently enough, the model for this pedagogy is a well-known critique of *religion*.

## FEUERBACH AND THE QUESTION OF INTELLECTUAL EMANCIPATION

In the late 1960's, Guy Debord breathed new life into Ludwig Feuerbach's influential critique of religion<sup>5</sup> by re-inscribing it in a new cultural context: the analysis and critique of what Debord famously called the "society of the spectacle." According to this account, the spectacle is at once the replacement of a sensuously experienced reality with its shadow (i.e., with the image) and the limitation of social forms of life by the conditions of the spectacular image. This line of thinking persists today in countless popular versions, in which endlessly proliferating forms of media tear men and women away from the real lives they could be leading as individuals and as communities, fixing them to a stance of passivity in relation to the spectacle that surrounds

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<sup>2</sup> *The Philosopher and his Poor*, trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster, and Andrew Parker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 223.

<sup>3</sup> See "Of Ignorant Schoolmasters," in Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta, *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 9.

<sup>4</sup> The figure of emancipation as an adventure recurs throughout *The Ignorant Master*.

<sup>5</sup> For Rancière, Feuerbach's critique of religion summarizes a whole way of thinking about religion in Europe in the 19th century. Indeed, it can be seen as one of the two ways of thinking about the critique of religion as productive of a new religion, that is to say, as "a new religion of humanity...that renders the bread and wine of everyday alienated existence of human powers into divine attributes." But this vision of a religion of humanity would destroy the artifices of religious practice (e.g. the elevated chalice and paten), replacing them with ordinary elements like bread and wine. Rancière perceptively points out that the poet Stéphane Mallarmé's vision of a new religion is opposed to Feuerbach's, precisely insofar as it reserves an ongoing place for "artifacts and rituals," insofar, that is, as the poet's is a "'religion' of artifice." *Mallarmé: The Politics of the Siren*, trans. Steve Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2011), 28, 30.

them. This attachment to illusions at the expense of lived reality is a familiar scenario: according to Debord, it is merely the material realization of the standard operation of religions, especially as revealed by Feuerbach's critique. Debord writes, "The spectacle is the material reconstruction of the religious illusion. Spectacular technology has not dispelled the religious clouds where men had placed their own powers detached from themselves; it has only tied them to an earthly base...The spectacle is the technical realization of the exile of human powers into a beyond; it is separation perfected within the interior of man."<sup>6</sup> The epigraph to *The Society of the Spectacle*, taken from the preface to the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*, confirms the Feuerbachian provenance of the manifesto: "for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence... illusion only is sacred, truth profane."<sup>7</sup> But this allegedly religious scenario of truth concealed by a societal obsession with signs, images, and illusions is also a Platonist scenario, indeed, one of the most famous scenarios in the history of philosophy, namely that of the prisoners chained to their seats in the theater of illusory images; they pine for a philosophical liberation that would direct them to the truth. The return of a Platonist division of appearance and reality in these two apparently progressive thinkers is less surprising than it might seem, if we consider how Feuerbach's theory of religion promises liberation for his readers.

For Feuerbach, the study of religion is an obvious exercise in emancipatory thinking. No doubt it was the emancipatory force of his text that inspired in the young Marx the idea of philosophy as transformation of the world. By means of a historically informed investigation of the Christian religion, which he presents as a simple "translation" of "the Oriental language of imagery into plain speech,"<sup>8</sup> Feuerbach hopes to restore to human beings their essence, an essence they cast outside of themselves by means of religious beliefs. The normative side of the philosophical claim that "all the attributes of the divine nature are attributes of human nature"<sup>9</sup> is the political exigency of "liberating Christianity," that is, of disrupting the projecting operations that alienate what is best in Christians from themselves and of redirecting the energies heretofore invested in the hope for an empty heaven toward the immanent horizon of morality.<sup>10</sup> In the preface from which Debord takes his epigraph, Feuerbach portrays his commitment, not only to anthropology, but to this immanent horizon, by aligning his thought with the material, sensible order.<sup>11</sup> He wants to turn the philosophy of religions away from the realm of ideas of the Absolute and toward the sensory conditions and productions of religious communities. This orientation toward the sensory would seem to contradict the idea of a latent Platonism. Strikingly, it is precisely in his idea of the sensible that he reproduces the Platonist pedagogy according to which there exists a division between those whose nature it is to know (and then to teach), and other human natures, which do not enjoy this privilege. The preface

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<sup>6</sup> *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Cambridge: Zone, 1994), § 20.

<sup>7</sup> *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989), xix.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 338-39.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

attests to a dream that the truth revealed by the book will one day enjoy a broad societal influence. Nonetheless, Feuerbach limits the reach of his ideas to the scholarly class. Under the current circumstances – which include both the relative novelty of his ideas and the pitiful state of superstition and ignorance of the many – “my work can be appreciated and fully understood only by the scholar...who is capable of forming a judgment, who is above the notions and prejudices of the learned and unlearned vulgar.”<sup>12</sup> Only scholars are capable of catching the allusions to Kant, Jacobi, and Schleiermacher; only the man of learning can possibly keep up with the historical details of the argument. All that is missing from this text, it would seem, is a political program for the propagation of these ideas in terms comprehensible to the vulgar.

Such a limitation of the reach of his ideas to a scholarly few might strike us as confusing. If Feuerbach takes the *sensible* as his philosophical focus, would not this decision make his work in principle understandable to even the dullest ignoramus? If his conviction that the “revelation of truth” requires “the eye and ear, the hand and foot” and *not* “the pen” is sincere, would not this epistemology extend the possibility of critical knowledge of religion to all with eyes to see and ears to hear? It turns out that a privileging of the sensible is not incompatible with a hierarchy of rational natures. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The schema of emancipation envisioned by Feuerbach looks something like the following: the masses of religious people move about within a certain realm of the sensible: of hymns, sacraments, sermons, pious paraphernalia, and so on, but they engage with these materials in such a way that alienates them from their own powers; religion being defined as “the disuniting of man from himself.”<sup>13</sup> This process of alienation is the effect of a certain usage of the imagination, according to which the empirical is made to appear *unreal* to religious hearts and minds, while that which is merely *apparent* (but, from a materialistic view, unreal) is invested with all the force of truth.<sup>14</sup> The basic grammatical structure of faith requires a subject that is “sensuous,” but it attaches to that sensible material a “predicate that is not sensuous.”<sup>15</sup> This particular linking of the sensuous to the non-sensuous, by means of the imagination, fosters a subjective attachment to “external signs,” symbols, media, and other mere appearances. This attachment is responsible for the transmission of the faith to “the ignorant and indiscriminating multitude.”<sup>16</sup> Such is the pedagogy specific to religion, which perpetuates the structure of alienation, and which therefore must be opposed by the emancipatory pedagogy of the materialist critique of religion.

Feuerbach thus posits two distinct regimes of the sensible. The former is determined by the imaginative usage of a whole host of external objects (texts, artifacts of material culture), along with the dogmatic theological schemata governing their place in religious life (as monuments of human imagination); this is a systematic expropriation of natural human powers of sensation. The second regime results from the re-appropriation of what religions, by means of their

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., xxii-xxiii.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., xix.

imaginative apparatuses, have torn away from the human being. This more enlightened regime promises us a return to our natural powers of feeling. Religious men and women are at one and the same time mired in the sensible, taken as the opposite of the intelligible, and cut off from the sensible, taken as the “highest feeling of self.”<sup>17</sup> The first regime is determined by a basic process of mediation, whereas the latter is a return to sensory immediacy. One makes an exit from the former regime of sensibility by operating a translation of that regime into the higher, more refined regime of sensibility. Not everyone can correctly make this translation, however: one must be a “scholar,” hence the connection between an idea of sense and a hierarchy of intelligences. Feuerbach’s idea of the sensible in the preface to the second edition of his controversial text is a hinge concept, allowing the enlightened reader (that is, the one who by nature and by training already has the capacity to become enlightened) to make the pivot from one regime to the other, and in this manner to emancipate himself.

In the anti-authoritarian sixties, it is not surprising that Debord does not ascribe such a privilege to the scholars. But he retains a structurally analogous logic of emancipation according to which some cultural object separates the masses from their native powers, hindering them from the emancipation that critical consciousness of this situation would facilitate. Jacques Rancière’s work on pedagogy and the logic of emancipation and stultification strenuously opposes the apparently progressive Debordian-Feuerbachian framework. He says as much in an essay that extends the perspective articulated in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* to the aesthetic question of the spectator. Rancière mentions Debord and Feuerbach only briefly, in order to contrast their view, according to which “the mediation of a third term [e.g., the imaginative production of sacraments out of ordinary material elements for Feuerbach, the spectacle for Debord] can be nothing but a fatal illusion of autonomy, trapped in the logic of dispossession and its concealment.”<sup>18</sup> In the context of this essay, he is more concerned with undercutting the persistent Debordian problematic of the spectator than the Feuerbachian critique of religion. But both expressions of this self-same logic of emancipation are relevant because both presuppose a kind of inegalitarian pedagogy. I have attempted to show how Feuerbach’s critique of religion presupposes the inequality of rational natures. He presupposes that there are certain kinds of persons capable of lifting themselves above the religious lifeworld, and others who cannot escape its alienating structure. If Rancière undercuts the Debordian manifestation of this logic, his work might also help us to begin to conceptualize an alternative to the Feuerbachian framework of intellectual emancipation with respect to religion. To imagine such an alternative, we must begin by defining the “third term of mediation” mentioned above, for it is the crux of Rancière’s critique of this particular sort of pedagogy.

#### **FROM THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGION TO THE POETICS OF RELIGIOUS MATERIALS**

The rejoinder to the Debordian-Feuerbachian critique attempts to extend the “logic of emancipation” developed in Rancière’s philosophy of education to the question of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 283-84.

<sup>18</sup> *The Emancipated Spectator*, 15.

spectatorship and the politics of looking. Here he wants to contest the idea that the artist transmits some knowledge or understanding to his public. "In the logic of emancipation," which would be common to the making of art and to pedagogy, "between the ignorant schoolmaster and the emancipated novice there is always a third thing—a book or some other piece of writing—alien to both and to which they can refer to verify in common what the pupil has seen, what she says about it and what she thinks of it."<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the material book which serves as the material for discussion between teacher and student is in the most banal, obvious sense of a thing in common; in what sense, then, could this thing in common become "the egalitarian intellectual link between master and student"? <sup>20</sup> Above all, the book serves this function insofar as *it* is the principle of intelligence to which the student is attached, *not* that of the teacher. The teacher does not possess a special intellectual capacity for making sense out of the book; his words are not an adequate substitute for those in which the book itself manifests its significance, its promise of a reward for the one who would try to make sense out of it. Intellectual emancipation demands that the educator's intelligence becomes decoupled from his will in the pedagogical relationship. The educator's role is to make sure that the student applies his attention to the book, an entity that exercises an authority that the educator does not claim. The principle of the book's intelligence is related to its materiality, and here we see an important respect in which Rancière defines a regime of the sensible that differs drastically from what we encountered in Feuerbach. Quoting Jacotot, Rancière suggests that "the ignorant examiner's art is to 'bring the examinee back to the material objects, to a *thing* that he can verify with his senses.' "<sup>21</sup> In its sensible materiality, the book (or any other relevant thing-in-common) can be accessed by teacher and student alike. And this principle of sensibility ensures that, contra Feuerbach, no class of persons can be constitutively excluded from a conversation about history, religion, and philosophy, simply because they lack the capacity to search out the relevant texts. Where in Feuerbach the sensible is a principle of separation or of alienation, for Rancière it is an egalitarian link between two individuals.

The convergence of these two qualities of the book (its intelligence and its materiality) hinges on Rancière's rewriting or translation of Jacotot's radical pedagogy, which posits a difference in kind between emancipation and *explication*. As explicator, the educator is the master of a text's meaning, which is constitutively hidden; he knows how to transmute this mastery of the material into a perpetual inequality in relation to his students. "The schoolmaster opens his mouth to explain the book. He makes a series of reasonings in order to explain the series of reasonings that constitute the book. But why should the book need such help?"<sup>22</sup> Rancière's answer to this question is that the book does not need any help. As a kind of material resistance to the logic (or the myth) of the expiatory order, the book becomes a third term between teacher and pupil, to which they both must respond and be accountable. It makes communication possible between these two interlocutors, while at the same time holding them

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 14-5.

<sup>20</sup> *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 13.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 4.

apart from one another. The book serves this function inasmuch as it is a complete, material, silent thing in the world, in which “there is nothing the master can hide from [the student]...there is nothing hidden, no words underneath words, no language that tells the truth of language.”<sup>23</sup> That is to say, there are no words or language whose significance the student cannot investigate for himself. In its very materiality, the book “keeps two minds at an equal distance, whereas explication is the annihilation of one mind by another.”<sup>24</sup> What separates student from teacher is not the distance of *height* but that distance which makes any communication at all possible. Distance here is, paradoxically, a principle of equality, and its material support consists in this feature of writing, that its meaning belongs to no one.

Rancière thus celebrates what appears in Socrates’ *Phaedrus* as a threat.<sup>25</sup> In that dialogue, Plato sees the potential democracy of the silent, written word very clearly, and it scares him. This potential is harbored in the paradoxically loquacious muteness of the apparently dead letter, that is, in the book’s frustrating evasion of the philosopher’s questioning and in its ready availability to the vulgar. As Socrates says, “when it has been written down, every discourse roams about everywhere, reaching indiscriminately those with no understanding.” At the same time, “if you [i.e. the philosopher] question anything that has been said because you want to learn more, it continues to signify just that very same thing forever.”<sup>26</sup> If it is impossible to find the living, paternal spirit behind the dead letters, to find words beneath the words on the page, it is nonetheless possible to venture translations and counter-translation of these words, to take them as the occasion for making an intellectual adventure. “It is the arbitrariness of language that makes [people] try to communicate by forcing them to translate—but also puts them in a community of intelligence.”<sup>27</sup> And this would be the function of the schoolmaster, if he is no longer needed to explicate the hidden: to constrain his students to make translations, to become artisans of the written and spoken word, and thereby to join the ideal community of speakers, narrators, translators, and poets.

Jacotot, in his radical method of *enseignement universelle*, placed a great emphasis on the pedagogical value of exercises in *improvisation*, of speaking by oneself, extemporaneously on a given topic, and of opening oneself up to the objections of others.<sup>28</sup> For him, the classroom should be a space in which a student has a chance to improve her skills in this mode of

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 23-4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>25</sup> *The Philosopher and his Poor*, 40.

<sup>26</sup> *Phaedrus* 275d-e. *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 552.

<sup>27</sup> *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 58.

<sup>28</sup> One should keep in mind here that Jacotot hit upon the idea of the ignorant master (though this is Rancière’s term, not his) as he discovered that he could teach Flemish students to read and to speak in French despite the fact that they had no language in common (Jacotot spoke no Flemish; his students spoke no French).

speaking, for it is an activity at which one can in fact improve.<sup>29</sup> Rancière explains that this privileging of improvisation owes to the fact that it is “the exercise of our intelligence’s leading virtue: the poetic virtue.”<sup>30</sup> Improvisation becomes the process according to which the student is enjoined to “make poetry; [to] translate and to invite others to do the same.”<sup>31</sup> In this pedagogy, *poiesis* is not equivalent to some kind of *creatio ex nihilo*; it always proceeds by reference to that “third thing” in common between pedagogue and pupil. The “poetic labor of translation,” Rancière writes, “is at the heart of all learning.”<sup>32</sup> The texts that religious studies educators place before their students are marked by an opacity that both elicits translation<sup>33</sup> and renders every such translation provisional, revisable, non-final, non-authoritative. Improvisation and translation are two poetic crafts that are learned and practiced in the ignorant master’s classroom.

We have already seen that the pedagogy that underlies Feuerbach’s classic critique of religion assumes that such mediate objects are so many alienating expropriations of human powers. In light of his recent focus on matters of aesthetics, rather than focusing on Feuerbach’s critique of religion as a model for thinking about images, Rancière is more concerned with demonstrating, against that latter-day Feuerbachian, Guy Debord, and his contemporary disciples, that the condition of spectatorship is far from alienating. Rather it is “is our normal situation. We also learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed.”<sup>34</sup> This line of thinking nonetheless has the potential to inform an approach to emancipatory pedagogy in the kinds of theological and religious contexts in which Feuerbach was intervening. The Feuerbachian analogue to the spectator is, of course, the believer or practitioner. If we accept Rancière’s claim that spectatorship, far from being antithetical to learning and knowing, is actually a mode in which we learn and know, perhaps the same can be said for religious belief and practice; belief, like spectatorship, involves a complex intertwining of activity and passivity, receptivity and searching-out. Perhaps emancipation with respect to religion does not require that the student begin by unlearning her belief or unbelief, in submission to the spoken or unspoken strictures of the instructor, but by comparing what she has already seen or heard of some tradition with what she is experiencing for the first time in the religious studies classroom. This idea traces a middle way between the conception of religious studies education as reducible to self-exploration and personal

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<sup>29</sup> See *Enseignement universelle. Langue maternelle*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Mansut Fils, 1834), 272-83. In these passages, Jacotot identifies three rules of improvisation: “Learn to master yourself...don’t let yourself be intimidated by your adversaries’ interruptions...begin, continue, and finish.”

<sup>30</sup> *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 64.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>32</sup> *The Emancipated Spectator*, 10.

<sup>33</sup> Once again, keeping in mind the origins of Jacotot’s method in the effort to teach students to speak a foreign language helps explain the importance of “translation” to the method. But as Rancière reinterprets it, translation should be understood as a poetic refiguring, in a contemporary idiom, of a text from which the translator is separated by time and place.

<sup>34</sup> *The Emancipated Spectator*, 17.

discovery and conceptions that present the classroom as a neutral and objective space in which the student's personal history has no place.

Such a shift in pedagogical orientation would demand undoing the presumption that emancipation in religious studies education amounts to the student's arrival at some particular idea of the essence of "religion," whether it be Feuerbach's idea of alienated human powers, a more or less enlightened version of the universalisms delineated by Tomoko Masuzawa, or a belief in the basic goodness or badness of a particular tradition or religion in general. Instead, perhaps emancipation begins with a disciplined searching-out of texts, images, and sounds, which results in some spoken or written "translation" or improvisation of such materials—that is, some *poem*—by the student. Feuerbach's idea of the "translation" of religious materials<sup>35</sup> into "plain speech" depends upon the edifice of a theory that offers a kind of key to interpretation and translation of religious texts *in general* and thus dictates *in advance* how any translation of a text will proceed. This kind of idea shows respect neither for the intelligence of the books under discussion nor for the minds that he hopes to liberate by his labor of translation. If Feuerbach's theory of "translation" depends upon *explanation* or *explication* (if, indeed, he does not think that translation is simply equivalent to explication), Rancière's theory implies that "understanding a book ... 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 ... transformation that constantly *rewrites* the book according to the ever-changing demands of social situations," to cite an essay by Yves Citton.<sup>36</sup>

An extension of Rancière's response to Debord and his pedagogy implies that intellectual emancipation with respect to religion might inhere in a poetics of religious materials, in an idea of religious studies education as a discipline of searching, translation, and narration.<sup>37</sup> Such a poetics entails a practice of equality, because it returns the work of acquiring and producing knowledge to the resources of looking, comparing, speaking, and writing that are common to all people. Taking Rancière seriously compels us to give up the idea that the discipline of religious studies leads those of us who have staked careers on it to have some privileged, special, if not secret, kind of knowledge about all those phenomena that might be subsumed under the name "religion." Given the almost impossible expertise that we are at times expected to manifest, especially in smaller departments or in assignments to teach classes like "World Religions" and "Religious Classics," instructors in our field might be perfect candidates to become the ignorant masters that in many cases, we already often are. "In the act of speaking," Rancière claims, "man doesn't transmit his knowledge, he makes poetry; he translates and

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<sup>35</sup> See *The Essence of Christianity*, xiii.

<sup>36</sup> "'The ignorant schoolmaster:' Knowledge and authority," in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, ed. Jean-Philippe Deranty (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 37. It should be noted, however, that Rancière would be unlikely to give the constraints and demands of new "social situations" the weight that Citton does in this essay.

<sup>37</sup> There is no longer any room for Feuerbach's limitation of the practice of making historical and conceptual connections to a certain class of people with the capacity to understand such things, with a notion of texts and their intertexts as "third things" in Rancière's sense.

invites others to do the same.”<sup>38</sup> This declaration does not make the poetic craft an irrational exercise. Far from it: the making of poetry requires knowledge, requires intelligence, but does not require the transmission of knowledge, whose mode is always the imposition of one person’s intelligence upon that of another.

### **THE IGNORANT MASTER’S TRANSLATION WORKSHOP**

The shift from critique to poetics might prompt a rethinking of the hallowed and time-honored practice of close reading. Call this re-conception “close reading at a distance,” where the distance is that characteristic of all human communication, the “forest of signs”<sup>39</sup> in which we live and move, sometimes with each other; this is not the distance of the stultifying educator who makes all education depend on his own knowledge, on his epistemological height with respect to his pupils. In part, it is the book as a “third thing” characterized by its own intelligence and materiality that guarantees this distance, but it is also ensured by the educator’s respect for these qualities of the book (or other artifact), manifested in his refusal to impose a reading of the significance of the text. This is a refusal to imply that the words he offers, and no one else’s, are the requisite words that are needed, over and above those of the book itself, to make sense of the latter. Extending and amplifying Rancière’s point, it should be added that such a refusal can only be the outcome of a *discipline* on the part of the educator, according to which he actively resists the temptation to make his intelligence a power of domination. It requires a stance of humility, if not of awe in face of the fact that, as Jacotot believed, “God created the human soul capable of instructing itself, and of discerning, without a master, everything that surrounds us.”<sup>40</sup>

Rancière defines emancipation in education as the establishment and maintenance, that is, the practice, of a connection between an individual student and the *intelligence* of the book on the one hand, and the *will* of the educator, on the other. Opposed to this arrangement is the situation of stultification, in which the student is riveted not only to the master’s will, but to *his intelligence*.<sup>41</sup> The opposite of emancipation is a situation in which one person’s intellect is

<sup>38</sup> *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 65. As Rancière points out in a different context, this kind of claim, which can be understood as an axiom of a “poetics of knowledges,” should not be taken as a revelation that, despite what scholars *think* they are doing, they’re *actually* doing nothing more than literature. Such a demystifying move would be inconsistent with the practice of equality. Rancière’s thesis about a poetics of knowledges “does not claim that [scholarly disciplines] are invalid because they tell stories. It claims that they must borrow their presentations of objects, their procedures for interaction and their forms of argument from language and common thought. A poetics of knowledge is first a discourse which reinscribes the force of descriptions and arguments in the equality of common language and the common capacity to invent objects, stories and arguments.” “Thinking between disciplines: An aesthetics of knowledge,” trans. Jon Roffe, *Parrhesia*, no. 1 (2006): 11-12.

<sup>39</sup> *The Emancipated Spectator*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> *Enseignement universelle. Langue maternelle*, 214. Rancière does not address Jacotot’s insistence upon the *theological* foundations of intellectual emancipation.

<sup>41</sup> *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 13.

subjected, if not subjugated, to the domination of another's. Substituting the intelligence of the book for the intelligence of the master, along with the corresponding substitution of the paradox of the ignorant, emancipatory master for a learned, stultifying one constitutes the practice of equality in education. Of course, forsaking the logic of explication does not require giving up the principle that students new to a given text or tradition often need to become familiar with a host of complex literary, historical, and social contexts to responsibly undertake their "translations." What is crucial, however, is that the teacher offer these contexts in the mode of *narration*, which is one of the common resources of communication mentioned above, rather than in the mode of explication. In explication the educator's knowledge is presented as the key to a proper interpretation, delivered in some special, expert way of speaking that remains impracticable for the student. Rancière defines the teacher as "first of all, a person who speaks to another, who tells stories and returns the authority of knowledge to the poetic condition of all spoken interaction."<sup>42</sup> Therefore, it is not a question of the validity or even the sufficiency of, nor of the need for, the knowledge attained by the instructor, but of the mode according to which it comes to be shared with students. Students can learn from a master who lacks knowledge, but it is the lack of a coupling of knowledge and authority, not the lack of knowledge as such, that seems essential to intellectual emancipation. This point, on which hinges the very concept of the ignorant master, has special relevance for scholars and teachers of religious studies; given the breadth of the field of human life designated, for better and worse, by the term "religion," instructors are often called upon to teach texts and traditions with which they might not be especially familiar. Paradoxically, the impossible expertise expected of religious studies teachers provides the latter with an exceptional opportunity to practice becoming ignorant masters: in this context, it is less difficult for us to imagine how a student might arrive at something that the teacher did not know.

But what prevents this reconceived understanding of religious studies education from authorizing students to simply pass off their own prejudices, long-entrenched habits of thinking, and first impressions as adequate translations of class material? Distracted by the radical idea that the intelligence of the teacher is in nowise superior to that of the student, it would be easy to miss the rigor entailed by this account of emancipation, which *does* accord to the educator an essential modicum of authority over the student.<sup>43</sup> When the student simply recycles her prejudices and passes them off as an interpretive response to the text at hand, the master recognizes that she is not really *searching*.<sup>44</sup> This principle does not contradict the principle posited at the conclusion of the preceding section, to wit, that just as spectatorship as such is not tantamount to alienation, neither is religious belief as such. Rancière's defense of spectatorship is not a vindication of pure passivity and receptivity; rather, it is a defense of spectatorship as an *active* and creative linking of what the spectator looks at with what she has

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<sup>42</sup> "Of Ignorant Schoolmasters," 6.

<sup>43</sup> Indeed, the teacher "is *only* an authority." *Ibid.*, 2; emphasis added.

<sup>44</sup> "From the schoolmaster the pupil learns something that the schoolmaster does not know himself. She learns it as an effect of the mastery that forces her to search and verifies this research. But she does not learn the schoolmaster's knowledge." *The Emancipated Spectator*, 14.

seen before. This idea of spectatorship is *not* a simple reduction of that which is unfolding in the present to something perceived in the past. Intertwining activity and passivity calls for the active, creative poetic virtue of linking, as well as the stance of openness and receptivity characteristic of looking. Rancière charges the ignorant master with the task of checking to make sure that his students are searching and practicing the poetic virtue of forging connections between new and old.

The emancipatory master is an *ignorant* master, but he remains a *master*, nonetheless. He is a master inasmuch as he exercises authority over the actions of his students, but also inasmuch as he aspires to be a master of the “ignorant examiner’s art,” to which we alluded above. The first paradox of the ignorant master is that he is a teacher who is not ashamed of his ignorance. The second paradox is that committed as he is to the equality of intelligences as a starting point, he is a master whose authority<sup>45</sup> is not equivalent to *domination*. His is the art of posing the non-loaded question, perhaps even of posing questions to which the master (being ignorant) does not know the answer. The ignorant master’s art entails directing the attention without concealing or predicting a predetermined end,<sup>46</sup> inviting students to make an intellectual adventure, and inventing opportunities for improvisation. The master instructs by “verifying that [the pupil] is always searching...the master is he who keeps the researcher on his own route,”<sup>47</sup> not a route that the master has determined for her, nor a route that is transferable from one student to another, because each learns in her own way, as each learns by comparing the new thing to that which she already knows.

We might summarize this thought by noting that both the art and the authority of the ignorant master are that of the *assignment*, the master’s constant endeavor being to determine the most effective way to direct the will of the student such that she applies her attention to the text in order to say what she thinks it means. Typical writing assignments in religious studies classes are of two basic kinds: one asks students to venture their personal response to some text or artifact and another asks them to produce or reproduce objectively true facts about a text or tradition. Rancière seems to invite us to think of a third basic way of conceptualizing the assignment, one that encourages students to write something that only they could write, but that is at the same time respectful of the intelligence of the book. For on the one hand, the poetic translation or improvisation that results from an attentive searching-out of a text or artifact is a product that results from the student’s own individual path in searching; on the other hand, as a translation, it bears a responsibility to the materiality and intelligence of the book, which exercises an authority over student and teacher alike. In any case, though, the book as a “third thing” is no longer a power of alienation, no longer a “fatal illusion of autonomy,” as it is for Feuerbach.

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<sup>45</sup> I will leave to one side the problem of the *source* of the master’s authority, given the axiomatic equality of intelligences.

<sup>46</sup> This principle obviously differentiates the ignorant master’s pedagogy from the celebrated Socratic method of philosophical education, which is predicated upon the inequality of intelligences. For an articulation of this difference, see *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 25ff.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

The difference between the authority of the ignorant master and the domination of other educators consists in the fact that the book, by virtue of its own intelligence, exercises itself independently of the master's intelligence; the book has a qualitatively different sort of authority than the master. As crucial as this principle is to Jacotot and Rancière's idea of intellectual emancipation, equally essential is the idea of the student as poet and translator. The ignorant master is the one who has worked longer with words, and who works, not only at the arts of speaking and writing, but at the art of directing the attention of her pupils so that they might become better artisans of the word. As a poet, the student, like every other human being, "communicates as an *artisan*: as a person who handles words like tools ... he communicates as a *poet*: as a being who believes his thought communicable, his emotions sharable.<sup>48</sup> The dream that motivates and animates the project of intellectual emancipation is a "dream of a society of emancipation that would be a society of artists."<sup>49</sup> When equality is practiced, the classroom becomes a space in which we live *as if* this dream were a reality, *as if* we were equals with our students. The classroom thereby becomes something less like a site of knowledge transmission and intake, and more like an artisan's workshop.

JOSEPH BALLAN has taught classes in religious studies at Elmhurst College and the University of Chicago. His publications include essays on Kierkegaard, modern Jewish philosophy, liturgical time, and the spiritualization of labor.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 71.