

RANCIERE'S 'LITERARY ANIMALS'.
THE CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY OF 'POLITICAL SUBJECTIVATION'

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ABSTRACT

Jacques Rancière re-inflects Aristotle's famous maxim to claim that 'man is a political animal because he is a literary animal'. He goes on to relate this characteristic of 'literarity' to Plato's description of written language as an 'orphan letter', to a process of 'disincorporation' and to a distinction between a 'body' and a 'quasi-body'. These founding assumptions of Rancière's theory of politics have attracted significant attention among commentators. Yet existing commentary on Rancière's work has left a number of key questions unresolved. Does the power of 'literarity' depend on the development of mass literacy, of the institution of literature and the development of the printing press? What, precisely, is the value of the distinction between a 'body' and a 'quasi-body'? Is, as many critics have argued, Rancière's notion of 'literarity' fundamentally ahistorical, falsely universalising and hence politically naive? Through close readings of Rancière's interpretations of Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Balzac's novel, *Le Curé de village*, alongside its own reading of an incident in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, this article seeks to elucidate these questions. It argues that 'literarity' does indeed function as a transhistorical constant in Rancière's work but that this does not justify accusations of ahistoricism or naivete.

KEYWORDS

Jacques Rancière, 'literarity', political subjectivation, quasi-bodies, Hobbes

RANCIERE'S 'LITERARY ANIMALS'.

THE CONDITIONS OF POSSIBILITY OF 'POLITICAL SUBJECTIVATION'

In *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), Jacques Rancière offers the following definition of the capacity for political agency he presumes all human beings to possess:

Man is a political animal because he is a literary animal who lets himself be diverted from his 'natural' destination by the power of words. This *literarity* is at once the condition and the effect of the circulation of 'actual' literary utterances. However, these utterances take hold of bodies and divert them from their destination insofar as they are not bodies, in the sense of organisms, but quasi-bodies, blocks of speech circulating without a legitimate father to accompany them to their authorised addressee. Therefore they do not produce collective bodies. Instead, they introduce lines of fracture and disincorporation into imaginary collective bodies.¹

Clearly, in this passage Rancière is seeking to re-inflect Aristotle's famous definition of 'man's' fundamental nature as a 'political animal' in the first book of the *Politics*. Aristotle argues that humans' essence as political animals depends on their possession of 'the power of speech', of the *logos*, that enables them 'to indicate what is useful and harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust'. This power, in turn, distinguishes humans from animals, according to Aristotle, who possess 'voice', the *phonè*, that may allow for the communication of feelings of 'pleasure and pain' but does not enable the kinds of deliberative judgement that are necessary to distinguish between the just and the unjust and hence partake in rational political debate.²

Rancière had opened his earlier book, *Disagreement* (1999), by quoting precisely this passage from the *Politics*, before going on to question Aristotle's assumption that the distinctions between the animal and the human, voice and speech, infra-political expressions of pain and rational political statements were straightforward or unproblematic. For, as Rancière shows, making such distinctions is the very stuff of

politics itself, as evident in the repeated attempts of those in positions of power to exclude various social groups – women, slaves, proletarians, immigrants – from the realm of political debate, precisely by designating their protests as instances of irrational ‘voice’, noise, or *phonè*, rather than coherent ‘speech’ or *logos*.³ At the very heart of politics, according to Rancière, are thus attempts by those forces he terms ‘police’ to impose ‘a distribution of the sensible’, a matrix of perception and feeling that defines, a priori, which social groups are visible and which invisible, which are assumed to possess the capacity for rational speech and which assumed able merely to express inarticulate complaint, which are hence equipped to perform leadership functions and which purely manual labour, all in accordance with each group’s supposedly natural characteristics (*Politics*, pp.7-14). Political ‘subjectivation’, in this context, involves excluded or marginalised groups challenging the dominant ‘distribution of the sensible’, laying claim to their equality by means of ‘the production, through a series of acts, of an instance and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience’ (*Disagreement*, p.35). Such an act of political ‘subjectivation’ will involve a process of ‘disincorporation’ insofar as it involves marginalised or excluded groups rejecting the place that has thus far been allotted to them within the body politic.

Re-inflecting Aristotle’s ‘political animal’ as a ‘literary animal’, Rancière hence attributes a decisive role to the ‘literary’, or to what he terms ‘literarity’, in such processes of political ‘subjectivation’. That role, in turn, appears to depend on his claim that ‘literary utterances’ lack any ‘legitimate father’, a claim Rancière elsewhere traces back to Plato’s characterisation of written language in the *Phaedrus*. According to Plato, the written word is an ‘orphan letter’, lacking a ‘father’, in the form of an authorised speaker, who, through his presence, can ensure the meaning of his words is correctly understood by their designated audience. Written or literary texts, by contrast with the spoken word, circulate ‘all over the place, hobnobbing with completely inappropriate people’, in Plato’s account. Hence written texts are inherently democratic and, as such, risk undermining Plato’s ordered, hierarchical republic through the multiple meanings they can generate in

the minds of just anyone who might re-appropriate them, making them re-signify to subversive effect.⁴

However, even if we have grasped the allusions to both Aristotle and Plato contained in Rancière's description of humans as 'literary animals', that description seems to leave a number of questions unresolved. Indeed, it remains unclear quite what it might mean to designate humans as 'literary animals'. We might wonder whether the ability of humans to realise their capacities as 'literary animals' is dependent on their own *literacy*, whether, hence, political agency is contingent on a minimum level of educational development for Rancière. Similarly, we might question whether Rancière's account implies that the capacity for political 'subjectivation' is dependent on the emergence of *literature* as an institution, something that, according to Rancière, only occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁵ This might, in turn, suggest that the development of the printing press and the widespread distribution of written texts are also pre-conditions for humans to realise the 'literarity' that apparently determines their status as political beings.

In his analysis of Rancière's work, Oliver Davis raises precisely these sorts of question, arguing that the notion of 'literarity' is insufficiently historically specified and thus 'obscures the question of the specific social conditions in which examples of it are encountered'. Davis hence calls for a restoration 'of the social contexts in which writing intervenes', a greater acknowledgement by Rancière of the fact that while, in theory, words may possess 'a potential to disrupt [...], in practice the accessibility of the written word for democratic reappropriation is, and almost always has been circumscribed by established formations of social power, which include the control of literacy and access to texts, books and libraries'.⁶ At first glance, Davis's concerns seem entirely reasonable. However, the notion that political agency might be straightforwardly determined by levels of literacy and access to written texts, being hence dependent on a particular stage of educational, social and technological development, is profoundly problematic from the point of view of Rancière's theory of politics. For this would allow for the establishment of a hierarchical distinction between those social groups considered

sufficiently intellectually or socially developed to have access to the power of 'literarity' and those groups who have yet to reach that stage. As Rancière argues, it is precisely this use of a chronology of socio-economic development as the basis for a social hierarchy that he rejects, not least since it is so common amongst promoters of neo-liberal policies, who routinely accuse those fighting to defend workers' rights of being backward, incapable of grasping the changed realities of today and hence unqualified to participate in debates about economic governance.⁷ Further, it is notable that in his analysis of the notion of 'literarity', Davis makes no mention of the role of the body or of the distinction between 'body' and 'quasi-body' that appears to play such a central role in the quotation we cited at the very beginning of this article.

For, alongside the issue of the precise nature of 'literarity', Rancière's description of humans as 'literary animals' in *The Politics of Aesthetics* raises a second series of questions about the relationship between literary texts and what he terms the 'quasi-body'. Indeed, having read that description, we may wonder both what is at stake in the distinction he draws there between a 'body' and a 'quasi-body' and quite what the relationship might be between such a 'quasi-body', written or literary texts, and the capacity for 'disincorporation' that Rancière identifies as being key to political 'subjectivation'. These questions tend, however, to be overlooked by those commentators who have sought to elucidate Rancière's conception of 'literarity'. In his *The Lessons of Rancière* (2012), Samuel Chambers devotes a chapter to the topic of 'literarity', promising to clarify the concept both theoretically and by reference to the struggles of Mexican immigrants to the United States for equal rights. Unfortunately, Chambers's analysis is hampered by his claim to have identified a shift in Rancière's thought from an initial use of the term 'literariness', followed by a later adoption of the slightly differently connoted 'literarity'. The claim is unfounded: the standard French term for 'literariness' is 'littérarité' and Rancière uses that second term consistently throughout his writings; it is simply that earlier English translators tended to render this as 'literariness', with later ones adopting the neologism 'literarity' in its place, the better to distinguish Rancière's concept from that employed by the Russian Formalists. Further,

Chambers's account of 'literarity' makes little reference to the body and provides no explanation of what Rancière's notion of a 'quasi-body' might mean.⁸

This absence of any sustained analysis of bodies and quasi-bodies is also a characteristic of the article Mark Robson dedicates to Rancière's 'literary animal',⁹ while being equally evident in Ian James's claim that there is 'a tension between Rancière's central emphasis on the bodily and the material [...] and the signal importance he accords to the *capacity* for speech, thought and the question of voice more generally'.¹⁰ As we hope to demonstrate, Rancière's notion of a 'quasi-body' functions precisely as the point of articulation between the embodied and the discursive in a manner that effectively refutes James's claim to have located 'a tension' at the heart of the former's theory of the political.

The notions of the literary animal, of literarity, of bodies, quasi-bodies and disincorporation are clearly central to Rancière's account of what he terms political subjectivation. Yet, as we have argued, Rancière's commentators have left unanswered a series of fundamental questions raised by these notions, questions regarding the precise nature of literarity, its dependence on or independence of any chronological account of historical, educational or technological development, and its relationship to the realm of the body or quasi-body. In what follows, we will attempt to clarify these various issues, the better to elucidate quite what is at stake in the claim that man is a political animal because he is a literary animal.

Literacy and Literarity

In *The Names of History* (1994), Rancière offers one of his apparently most straightforward and historically specific examples of the relationship between written texts, literacy, literarity, and political agency, in the course of his commentary on Thomas Hobbes's analyses of political 'sedition' in *Leviathan* (1651). In his account of the political developments that culminated in the execution of Charles I, Hobbes focuses on the role played by texts of two kinds, first, the sermons of preachers who find in the Scriptures reasons to criticise the Monarchy or to prophesy some future deliverance from

servitude and, second, the texts of classical Antiquity which provide justifications for regicide by characterising it as lawful tyrannicide in the name of democratic freedom.¹¹

The Scriptures re-interpreted by non-conformist preachers and the texts of classical antiquity thus function precisely as Plato's 'orphan letters', lacking an authorised speaker to control their meaning for a designated audience, they circulate freely. In this way, texts that should have served to legitimate monarchy, by appeal whether to the divine right of kings or to examples from the classical world, are re-appropriated and made to re-signify as allegories of political emancipation and republican democracy. The dissenters and parliamentarians of the English Civil War are thus 'children of the Book', whose political agency relies on their status as 'literary animals'. As Rancière puts it: 'The modern revolution, whose birth Hobbes is witnessing, could be defined as follows: the revolution of the children of the Book, who are "eager to write, to talk of themselves and others", the proliferation of speakers who are outside of their place and outside of the truth'.¹² The irony here, from Hobbes's point of view, is that the very texts that unleashed this sort of sedition were themselves vital to the establishment of the monarchical Commonwealth that they have nonetheless destroyed. For Hobbes argues that it is the power of speech and language that distinguishes men from animals, enabling the former to enter into that 'covenant' that forms the basis of the Commonwealth, ruled over by an imperious Sovereign Ruler, who thus elevates man from the violent state of nature.

Under the terms of Hobbes's 'covenant', every individual cedes their right to govern themselves to the Sovereign Ruler, who thus 'personates' all his subjects, 'incorporating' them into the commonwealth (*Leviathan*, pp.223-38). The most graphic illustration of this dual process of 'personation' and 'incorporation' is *Leviathan's* famous frontispiece, which features a crowned monarch brandishing a sword and sceptre, whose torso and arms are composed of the bodies of his subjects, each hence occupying their designated rank and performing their allotted function within the body politic. The Hobbesian body politic is not, however, a natural or organic entity; its founding covenant relies on language and hence arbitrary social convention. As Hobbes points out, the terms of the

covenants and laws on which his commonwealth depends must be articulated in discourse, widely publicised in order to secure the obedience of all its subjects (*Leviathan*, pp.311-34). However, as Hobbes also repeatedly points out, this necessary recourse to language is an inherently risky affair since speech is also always open to misuse and misinterpretation, the 'names' appended to, for example, Kings and subjects, ruler and ruled, prove to be 'inconstant', slippery things, so that a 'King' finds himself wrongly named a 'tyrant', a 'subject' an equal 'citizen' and 'regicide' becomes 'tyrannicide' (*Leviathan*, pp.100-118; 363-75).

Hobbes, the archetypal theorist of hierarchy and order, thus anticipates the founding assumptions of Rancière's theory of political emancipation and radical equality. First, he shares Rancière's conviction that no social order corresponds to a natural state of affairs and must hence have recourse to language, to discourse, to some kind of fiction to legitimate itself. Second, Hobbes anticipates Rancière's claim that these kinds of language, of legitimating discourse are characterised by an inherent literarity that renders them open to re-appropriation and re-signification by the very agents whose subservient status they seek to fix and legitimate.¹³ In this sense, Hobbes's commonwealth perfectly illustrates one of the meanings of Rancière's notion of a 'quasi-body'; Hobbes's body politic is, to quote Rancière, not 'a body, in the sense of an organism, but a quasi-body' founded on 'blocks of speech that circulate with no legitimate father' to secure their meaning. As a result, the condition of possibility of the establishment of Hobbes's commonwealth – humans' use of language to draw up a covenant – is simultaneously the condition of possibility of that commonwealth's sedition through acts of political subjectivation that exploit the potential inherent to literarity.

Rancière's reading of Hobbes would seem to suggest that this power of literarity is heavily dependent on a particular stage of historical, educational and technological development having been met. This is a stage in which the rise of Protestantism combined with the spread of mass literacy and the production and circulation of printed texts to provide the conditions of possibility for the kinds of sedition anatomised by Hobbes. Indeed, Davis rebukes Rancière for failing fully to acknowledge what he terms

'the institutional dimension to Hobbes's argument', namely the role the latter attributes to universities in educating the interpreters of both Scripture and classical texts to such a level as to enable them to re-appropriate the meanings of such texts to revolutionary ends (Davis, p.71). This notion that the power Rancière attributes to literacy is, in fact, contingent on a specific set of historical, educational or institutional conditions having been first met would seem confirmed by the analysis of these issues he offers in *Mute Speech*. Here, Rancière analyses the historical emergence of literature as institution in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, linking this institutional emergence to the power of literacy as a democratic force.

Writing at War

Rancière's argument is that literature first emerged as an institution in opposition to an earlier conception of *Belles Lettres*, in which strict, essentially Aristotelian conventions and hierarchies governed the relationships between a genre, such as classical theatre, the characters and actions depicted therein, typically the noble deeds of aristocrats and monarchs, and the appropriate language to be employed to express the thoughts and actions of such elevated characters. Literature first emerges when those strict conventions are challenged and literary texts, particularly the European novel, begin to represent people and subjects of all kinds, from the noble to the most banal, on an equal footing (*Mute Speech*, pp.41-72).¹⁴ Rancière suggests that the classical hierarchies of appropriate genre and style represented one way in which the fatherless, mobile nature of the written word had been contained and domesticated, rendered compatible with the hierarchical social order of the *ancien régime*. When literature emerged as an institution and the classical generic conventions were abandoned, anxieties concerning the disruptive force of the written word as Plato's 'orphan letter' re-emerged along with it. Indeed, this re-emergence of the motif of the 'orphan letter' is evident in the profusion of novels that deal precisely with 'déclassé' peasants and workers, whose immoderate social ambitions are depicted as being first inspired by reading novels (*Mute Speech*, p.92).

Rancière cites a number of examples of fictional characters whose fevered imaginations are nourished by their taking the fictions they read too seriously, from Don Quixote to Emma Bovary. However, he pays particularly close attention to Honoré de Balzac's *Le Curé de village* (1841). The heroine of Balzac's novel, Véronique, is the daughter of a lowly provincial scrap merchant who, thanks to the opportunities opened up in the wake of 1789 Revolution, accumulates a generous dowry for his daughter. This enables Véronique to marry the wealthy financier, Graslin, a miser who shows no interest in anything but accumulating more wealth. Véronique initially invests her unrequited passions in good works. However, as an adolescent she had been greatly affected by reading Jacques-Henri Bernardin de Saint Pierre's 1788 novel, *Paul et Virginie*, at once a tale of doomed love and a critique of France's pre-revolutionary class system set in a Mauritius that is depicted in utopian terms as a perfectly egalitarian society. Inspired by her reading of *Paul et Virginie*, Véronique embarks on an affair with the young worker, Jean-François Tascheron, whom she co-opts into her plan to escape to an island on the River Vienne and create their own utopia to rival the novel's idealised depiction of Mauritius. To fund this plan and inspired by his own dreams of social advancement, Tascheron robs and murders a local miser, before being arrested and going to the scaffold without divulging the name of his lover and accomplice, Véronique. In an effort to repent for her crimes, Véronique devotes herself and her fortune to improving the lot of the local villagers, working with an engineer to improve the surrounding agricultural land through a complex irrigation scheme.

For Rancière, Balzac's novel is a moral tale about precisely the dangers of literarity, a warning against the disruptive force of the 'orphan letter' that 'in going to speak to those to whom it should not, turns away from their destiny' two characters of working class stock, Véronique and Tascheron, and this to tragically destructive effect (*Mute Speech*, p.102, trans. mod.). He further interprets Véronique's good works, the irrigation scheme she plans and finances, as representing an alternative form of 'writing' that, in opposition to the fatherless writing contained in *Paul et Virginie*, is a form of script rooted in the very earth of the French countryside. As Rancière puts it: 'No living speech,

only another writing, can remedy the democratic evil of writing'. This 'other writing', unlike the fatherless, mobile writing of literature, is 'drawn on the earth itself, inscribed in the hard materiality of things' (*Mute Speech*, p.105). Further, he suggests that Balzac's tale of repentance through a rooted, material form of writing is merely the 'transposition, in the service of Christian orthodoxy' of the utopian projects of the Saint-Simonian engineer-priests. In 1833-4, the Saint-Simonians embarked on an expedition to Egypt in order, as Rancière puts it, 'to inscribe on the land itself, in canals and railroads, the book of life, the communal poem, of which the ancient hieroglyphs were merely the shadow' (*Mute Speech*, p.105). In other words, the Saint Simonians provide a tangible, historical example of an attempt to found a new organic community by domesticating the disruptive power of writing's 'orphan letter' by recourse to 'another writing', the good works and technological improvements inscribed in the very earth of Egypt. In their own technocratic way the Saint Simonians thus sought to realise Plato's banishing of poets from the republic, replacing the literarity of the orphan letter with 'a writing that was not written and more than written', seeking thus to realise 'the old Platonic idea of the community as the true poem' (p.105). As Rancière points out, although in the *Republic* Plato calls for the exclusion of the poets in order to counter the disruptive force of mimesis, elsewhere, for example in Book Seven of *The Laws*,¹⁵ he identifies a more salutary form of poetry that mimics and faithfully expresses the life or spirit of the community. This Rancière renders as 'the living poem, the choir or the dance in which the citizens imitate the principle of the polity, being enchanted by its tune or its pitch'. He continues: 'The disorder that poetic fiction introduced into the polity is corrected by the city itself, becoming the reality of the living poem, the realisation of good imitation' (pp.96-7, trans. mod.).

For Rancière, then, Balzac's *Le Curé de village* depicts, in fictional form, a 'war' between two forms of writing, in which writing as an orphan letter possessing the disruptive force of literarity is domesticated by recourse to a supposedly more rooted, material form of writing that promises to realise Plato's old dream of a living poetry that expresses the life and spirit of an organic community. The paradox of Balzac's novel,

however, is that it must have recourse to the very literarity whose disruptive force it seeks to condemn. Balzac must employ a novel that will circulate freely amongst people of all social ranks and classes to condemn the dangers inherent in writing that circulates in such an uncontrolled way (p.105). In this sense, Balzac confronts the same paradox as underpins Hobbes's commonwealth, a body politic that both depends on and risks being undermined by the disruptive power of the orphan letter on which its hierarchical social order is founded. In both cases, Rancière appears to be arguing that the disruptive force of literarity is dependent on certain specific historical, technological and educational developments – the spread of literacy and printed texts and the emergence of literature as an institution, most notably.

There are, however, two major reasons for doubting that Rancière makes literarity conditional on a certain stage of historical, educational or technological development having been reached. First, as we noted in our opening remarks, to make the power of literarity dependent on the stage of historical development achieved by particular individuals or social groups would be to introduce a hierarchy between the developed and the as yet undeveloped, an enlightened elite and an uneducated mass, in a manner that runs directly counter to the spirit and letter of Rancière's political theory. For that theory rests on working from what he terms 'the presumption of equality', allied to a consequent refusal to read off political or intellectual capacity from apparently objective sociological determinations of class or socio-economic status.¹⁶

Secondly, any such developmental account would imply that Rancière takes Plato's distinction between speech and writing to be valid and thus relies on a historical narrative that runs from an earlier stage, in which the meanings of spoken discourse actually *were* controlled by the authority of a speaker, to a later stage, in which the development of writing, mass literacy and literature has undermined that former authority and fixity of meaning. Yet Rancière has explicitly rejected Plato's distinction between speech and writing, stating that: 'Despite what the *Phaedrus* teaches us, there are not two kinds of discourse [...]. Every word, written or spoken, is a translation that only takes on meaning in a counter-translation ...'.¹⁷ If every statement, whether written

or spoken, relies on a process of 'counter-translation' to signify, this means that, by definition, the spoken word, as much as the written, is equally open to being re-appropriated and made to re-signify by its addressee. This implies, in turn, that literarity itself is a feature of language *prior to* the development of technologies of writing and printing, of the spread of mass literacy or the emergence of literature as an institution.

If we return once more to Rancière's definition of literarity and the literary animal in *The Politics of Aesthetics* we can see that he does indeed make the apparently counter-intuitive claim that literarity precedes the widespread distribution of written texts, acting as the pre-condition of their disruptive force. As he puts it, '*literarity is at once the condition and the effect of the circulation of "actual" literary utterances*' (*Politics*, p.39, emphasis added). This notion that literarity is *both the pre-condition and the effect* of the mass circulation of actual written texts is echoed in Rancière's reading of *Le Curé de village*. As we have noted, Balzac holds written texts, the novel, responsible for generating the immoderate desires that drive his heroine Véronique. However, this raises the question of why Véronique could not simply redeem herself by heeding the sermons delivered by the eponymous village priest, rather than having recourse to that 'other writing', in the form of her grandiose engineering projects. The answer, Rancière suggests, is that Véronique had already been encouraged to depart from her 'natural' destiny by the snatches of the Bible taught to her in her youth by a nun. Véronique thus could not be redeemed by the 'living speech' of Scripture because she had already 'transformed this path of salvation into the means of her perversion'. As Rancière continues:

The trajectory of the orphaned letter has, *in advance*, mocked and undermined the work of the speech of life. The speech of Scripture itself is rendered suspect by that trajectory. The bits and pieces of the catechism that a nun had taught little Véronique were already too dangerous, the novelist tells us, even before a well-meaning priest authorized the reading of *Paul et Virginie*.

(*Mute Speech*, p.105, trans. mod., my emphasis)

If Véronique was perverted 'in advance', before she even read a novel, and if literarity is both the precondition and the effect of the circulation of printed books, this surely means that, for Rancière, literarity is inherent to all language, whether written or spoken. The capacity to re-appropriate a given discourse and make it re-signify to emancipatory effect is thus not straightforwardly dependent on any specific stage of historical, technological or educational development being met. Mass literacy, the development of the printing press, the emergence of literature as an institution may all extend or magnify the power of literarity but that power pre-exists and conditions all of those developments; it does not depend upon them. Hence Rancière's statement that humans are political animals because they are literary animals has a transhistorical force; he posits this as an anthropological constant or even a kind of transcendental condition of possibility of human society itself, in comparison to which mass literacy, the printing press and the institution of literature are merely contingent historical developments.

Literarity and Intellectualism?

Any claim to the transhistorical, even transcendental status of literarity, of course, risks provoking the kind of objection raised by Davis when he argues that Rancière thus 'obscures the question of the specific social conditions in which examples of it are encountered' (Davis, p.111). A more radical version of this criticism might be articulated by drawing on the work of Pierre Bourdieu to suggest that Rancière is guilty of a typically 'intellectualist' fallacy, whereby he wrongly assumes that his tendency, as an intellectual, to relate to the social world as though it were a literary text to be interpreted or manipulated is a universal one. In this sense, Rancière might be accused of unconsciously importing into his analysis of social practices presuppositions that reflect his own privileged relationship to those practices. In other words, according to Bourdieu, the relatively privileged status enjoyed by intellectuals secures their material distance from the objects of their studies, encouraging them to treat social practices as though

they were so many texts to be deciphered or decoded. What this kind of approach forgets, Bourdieu maintains, is that what appears to the privileged intellectual observer as a set of texts to be interpreted represents for ordinary agents a range of practical problems to be negotiated with relatively unpredictable outcomes.¹⁸

Further, in construing social practices as texts, intellectuals risk overlooking that whole realm of non-discursive human 'practice', the realm of 'doxic' immediacy in which social imperatives are not explicitly articulated but 'picked up' or 'incorporated' by the mere fact of living in and moving through a particular social space. Bourdieu's anthropological studies of Kabylia provide him with empirical examples of such processes of doxic incorporation in their clearest, most elementary form. In Kabylia, he argues, a 'state of originary doxa' prevails, in which social imperatives 'go without saying because they come without saying', being incorporated directly or immediately into the embodied, pre-predicative structures of the 'habitus', 'on the hither side of all inquiry' (*Outline*, pp.167-68).

If Kabylia provides Bourdieu with empirical evidence of doxa in its 'originary' and hence most extreme form, he nonetheless maintains that analogous forms of doxic adherence are at the heart of the workings of habitus amongst citizens of advanced western societies also. It is, moreover, because social imperatives are incorporated in this non-discursive, pre-predicative way, incorporated into the unspoken affective structures of the habitus, that they are not amenable to critique or change by means of a simple 'prise de conscience'. 'Practice', Bourdieu insists, 'excludes any reflexive return' onto its non-discursive foundations;¹⁹ the imperatives incorporated into the habitus are thus characterised by 'an extraordinary inertia, which results from the inscription of social structures in bodies'.²⁰ Any such reflexive return and the social change it may provoke will hence be dependent on a set of predefined historical and socio-economic circumstances being met. A 'crisis' may intervene to shatter the otherwise 'pre-established harmony' between the affects and expectations incorporated into the habitus and the objective chances of those expectations being met. This 'crisis' will open a kind of 'practical epochè' or 'suspension' of adherence to the apparent self-evidence of the

status quo that may be transformed into a rational project for change with the help of the 'critical discourse' elaborated by intellectuals, whose material status is the precondition for their objective distance on the social world.²¹

In its insistence on specifying the precise conditions of possibility for social or political change to occur, Bourdieu's sociology may seem to offer a welcome antidote to the ahistoricism, naiveté or idealism that Davis, in common with other critics, implies is characteristic of Rancière's notion of literarity. There are, however, a number of problems inherent to Bourdieu's account. First of all and most strikingly, his claim that in 'the state of originary doxa' social imperatives 'go without saying because they come without saying', operating non-discursively, would seem to be contradicted by his extensive citation of Kabyle proverbs, myths and rituals in which those social imperatives clearly are articulated in discursive form. Seeking to explain this apparent contradiction, Bourdieu attempts to distinguish between two meanings of the term 'représentation' in French. In a first meaning, the term refers to a theatrical performance. According to a second meaning, 'la représentation' refers to any form in which characters, objects, events or ideas are re-presented in some kind of discursive medium, rather than simply being enacted in the supposed immediacy of their self-presence. Bourdieu argues that Kabyle myths, proverbs and rituals belong to the first category of 'représentations', they are 'practical representations' analogous to embodied theatrical performances and hence distinct from any mediated representation of social reality that might imply a capacity for critical distance, contestation and challenge, the very capacity that practice and doxa, by definition, preclude (*Logic*, p.108).

The surely questionable distinction between a practical and a mediated representation that Bourdieu is obliged to draw bears a striking resemblance to the opposition Plato draws between poets as bad imitators in the *Republic* and the 'living poem' that he welcomes in *The Laws* on account of its ability, in Rancière's words, to represent 'good imitation', in the form of 'the living poem, the choir or the dance in which the citizens imitate the principle of the polity, being enchanted by its tune or its pitch' (*Mute Speech*, p.96). Rancière's point, of course, is that Plato's distinction is specious, the expression of

the latter's belief in the myth of an organic community or body politic animated and inspired by the shared spirit or ethos of its members. We might argue that an analogous myth of organic community underpins Bourdieu's depiction of Kabylia as corresponding to 'the state of originary doxa',²² a state in which things 'go without saying because they come without saying' and hence myths, rituals and proverbs are not discursive representations but 'practical representations' in which the organic spirit of the community is immediately enacted. At this point, Rancière's account of the 'quasi-body' and its relationship to discursively articulated social imperatives may prove of further use.

As we have noted, on one level Rancière's notion of the 'quasi-body' allows him to distance himself from any idealised conception of the body politic as analogous to a natural organism, highlighting how any social structure is always founded on the arbitrary, conventional bases of linguistic utterances whose meanings can be re-appropriated and made to re-signify. It would be possible, however, to move from this 'macro' level of analysis to the more 'micro' level of the incorporation by individual agents of social imperatives and injunctions. Rancière's notion of the 'quasi-body' can be usefully deployed against Bourdieu's myth of a 'state of originary doxa' in which such processes of incorporation are immediate and total, placing those imperatives beyond the sway of reflexive critique because they are embodied. The notion of the 'quasi-body' enables us to think the manner in which discursive imperatives can indeed engage our sensibility, shaping and re-shaping our embodied affects and perceptions, while emphasising that any human body so shaped is never merely a natural organism acting out of biological instinct. Such bodies are, rather, 'quasi-bodies' shaped by discursive injunctions that may engage our affects but that are simultaneously, to quote *The Politics of Aesthetics* once more, 'blocks of speech circulating without a legitimate father to accompany them to their authorised addressee' (p.39). The 'quasi-body' is thus the medium through which social imperatives may be incorporated but may also misfire, be re-appropriated or made to re-signify. As such, they are the defining characteristic of humans in their status as political animals because they are literary animals. *Contra* Ian

James, then, it is clear that Rancière's account of political subjectivation does not forget the realm of embodied affect, focusing exclusively on the discursive instead. Rather that account hinges on the interpenetration of affect and discourse; the 'quasi-body' is the locus of that interpenetration.

This attempted summary of Rancière's account of literarity and the quasi-body as pre-conditions for any political subjectivation is unlikely to satisfy those who demand a more detailed specification of the historical conditions that enable or restrict political agency. On the contrary, Rancière's account will likely still seem to some to be falsely universalising and dangerously naïve as a result. In answer to such criticisms and by way of a conclusion, we shall turn to one further example of Rancière's political subjectivation. This will show that the most apparently materially and educationally deprived of social groups, namely African-American slaves on a Southern plantation, possessed a capacity to exploit the potential of literarity.

Literarity on a Slave Plantation

At first glance, slave society in the American South would seem to have little or no use for the kinds of literarity that Rancière identifies as key to political subjectivation. Slavery itself was enforced by measures of the most brutally coercive kind, while the slaves themselves were typically deprived of education or literacy, since both were seen as tools of possible revolt. Nonetheless, as Solomon Northup recounts in his classic memoir, *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), a number of plantation owners felt the need to legitimate slavery discursively, finding justifications for that institution in the Scriptures they preached to their slaves. One such owner is Peter Tanner, who quotes from the Book of Luke in an attempt to instil the requisite levels of obedience into his slaves, at the same time as legitimating their physical punishment in cases of disobedience. To quote Northrup's account:

The first Sunday after my coming to the plantation, [Tanner] called [the slaves] together, and began to read the twelfth chapter of Luke. When he came to the 47th

verse, he looked deliberately around him and continued – ‘And that servant which knew his lord’s *will*, - here he paused, looking around more deliberately than before, and again proceeded – ‘which knew his lord’s *will*, and *prepared* not himself’ – here was another pause – ‘*prepared* not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many *stripes*’.

‘D’ye hear that?’ demanded Peter, emphatically. ‘*Stripes*,’ [...]. ‘That n****r that don’t take care – that don’t obey his lord – that’s his master – d’ye see? – that ‘ere n****r shall be beaten with many stripes. [...] *That’s* Scriptor!’²³

The purpose of sermonising in this way is, from Tanner’s point of view, very clear. Indeed, as Blake Touchstone has shown, this use of oral religious instruction became quite general on Southern plantations between the 1840s and 1860s, as plantation owners, first, sought to respond to Northern abolitionists by showing they were engaged in saving the souls of their slaves. Second, such owners routinely referred to the Scriptures in an effort both to encourage slaves ‘to be honest and diligent labourers’ and as ‘evidence of divine sanction’ of the institution of slavery.²⁴ This kind of recourse to Scripture, moreover, involved a particular articulation between language and the body, in the sense that it aimed to persuade slaves to accept their allotted roles within the body politic as little more than beasts of burden. That subservient role, meanwhile, was figured as being somehow natural, the logical expression of an intrinsic inferiority of which slaves’ physical attributes – their skin colour and ethnically African appearance – were the visible signifiers.

However, as Northrup’s memoir reveals, the slaves’ own reaction to such religious instruction was often rather different to that intended by their masters. In a later passage, he reflects on the influence of such religious instruction on Patsey, one of his fellow slaves, concluding that despite her illiteracy and lack of formal education, Scripture became an important source of consolation, containing the promise of some future deliverance from slavery:

She had a dim perception of God and of eternity, and a still more dim perception of a Saviour who died even for such as her. [...] Patsey's life, especially after her whipping, was one long dream of liberty. Far away, to her fancy an immeasurable distance, she knew there was a land of freedom. A thousand times she had heard that in the distant North there were no slaves – no masters. In her imagination it was an enchanted region, the paradise of the earth. (*Twelve Years*, pp.173-74)

In short, Patsey has re-appropriated the words of Scripture that her masters intended to destine her to a life of mute obedience, making them re-signify as a promise of deliverance from slavery in this world.

Northrup's reflection on Patsey's secularised dream of deliverance is not, of course, easily transferable to the cinema screen. So, in Steve McQueen's 2013 adaptation of *Twelve Years a Slave* it is replaced by a scene that features nowhere in Northrup's original account. In the scene in question, some time after a variety of scenes depicting the various sermons delivered to the slaves by their plantation owners, we see Patsey, Solomon and their fellow slaves attend the funeral of one of their number, Uncle Abram. Standing by the grave, they strike up a version of the spiritual, 'Roll Jordan, Roll'. This incident may be fictional but it has considerable historical validity given the role played by spirituals, gospel music, the blues and jazz, alongside the black churches, in African-American life, generally, and the struggles for emancipation and civil rights, more specifically. 'Roll Jordan, Roll' was originally composed by the white Methodist preacher, Charles Wesley, in the eighteenth century. In the hands of African Americans, its tale of the enslavement and ultimate deliverance of the Jews from slavery in Egypt became a powerful allegory for the future deliverance of slaves on Southern plantations. In this sense, the song exemplifies that process analysed by W.E.B. Du Bois in the chapter he dedicates to 'The Sorrow Songs' in his classic, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). This is the process whereby '[t]he things evidently borrowed from the surrounding world undergo characteristic change when they enter the mouth of the slave. Especially is this true of Bible phrases'. In this way, Du Bois continues: 'The minor cadences of despair change

often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond'.²⁵

The 'characteristic change' that, according to Du Bois, Christian doctrine is subjected to in the 'sorrow songs' of African Americans corresponds very closely to Rancière's account of the way in which humans, as literary animals, re-appropriate those discourses that seek to fix and define them, making them re-signify in an act of political subjectivation that lays a trenchant claim to a shared humanity and equality. In the form of gospel, jazz and the blues, such acts of subjectivation by African Americans would contribute to one of the most influential global cultural phenomena of the twentieth century. In the political domain, these transformations of Scripture into allegories of deliverance from enslavement in the temporal world would feed into the struggles for emancipation and civil rights, as evident, to give but one celebrated example, in the rhetorical form taken by Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech.

Needless to say, the kind of political subjectivation evident in Patsey's personal philosophy of salvation or depicted fictionally in the singing of 'Roll Jordan, Roll' in McQueen's film would not prove sufficient, on their own, to bring about the end of slavery. Such moments of political subjectivation would have to combine with a wide range of other historical, social, economic and political developments before that goal was achieved. Nonetheless, those moments of political subjectivation were not themselves dependent on those material developments having first been realised; mass literacy, improved education and other developments were not the necessary precursors of political subjectivation, here, but factors that magnified and extended its dimensions and impact. This is what distinguishes Rancière from a thinker like Bourdieu, who assumes that a certain level of material and educational development must be met *before* humans can become political agents and who hence works from the assumption that the 'dominated classes', by definition, possess 'neither the interest, nor the leisure, nor the necessary instruments to re-appropriate the objective and subjective truth of what they are and what they do' (*Pascalian*, p.191). In the face of such an assumption,

and the risk of false solicitude it surely carries, Rancière will insist that humans, *all* humans regardless of condition, are political animals because they are literary animals.

NOTES

1. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible*, translated by G. Rockhill, (London: Continuum, 2004), p.39. Subsequent references to '*Politics*' will be given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
2. Aristotle, *The Politics*, translated by T.A.Sinclair, (London: Penguin, 1962), p.60.
3. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*, translated by J. Rose, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), pp.1-9. Subsequent references to '*Disagreement*' will be given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
4. Plato, *Phaedrus*, translated by R.Waterfield, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.125-26.
5. See, Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech. Literature, Critical Theory and Politics*, translated by J. Swenson (New York: Columbia Press, 2011). Subsequent references to '*Mute Speech*' will be given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
6. Oliver Davis, *Jacques Rancière*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), pp.110-13. Subsequent references to 'Davis' will be given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
7. Jacques Rancière, *Les Temps modernes. Art, temps, politique*, (Paris: La Fabrique, 2018), pp.13-48.
8. Samuel A. Chambers, 'Literarity', *The Lessons of Rancière*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.88-122. For the mistaken claim re. Rancière's shift from 'literariness' to 'literarity', see pp.114-20.
9. Mark Robson, "'A Literary Animal": Rancière, Derrida and the literature of democracy', *Parallax*, 15:3 (August 2009), 88-101.
10. Ian James, *The New French Philosophy*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p.114.
11. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (London: Penguin, 1968), pp.363-75. Subsequent references to '*Leviathan*' will be given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
12. Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History. On the Poetics of Knowledge*, translated by H. Melehy, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p.20.

13. Rancière's reading of Hobbes here might appear not merely idiosyncratic but wholly illegitimate, given the widespread understanding of the philosopher as a theorist of natural law grounded in Christian doctrine. Hence Howard Warrender argues that the obligations to form a commonwealth 'are derived directly or indirectly from an obligation to obey the dictates of natural law', an obligation that itself reflects 'man's [sic] membership of God's natural kingdom which is governed by a natural law capable of being discovered by his own rational faculty' (Howard Warrender, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes. The Theory of Obligation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), p.250). Indeed, Rancière might be accused of falling into the trap, identified by Bernard Gert, of wrongly attributing to Hobbes 'Hume's account of reason as purely instrumental' and hence of ignoring that for Hobbes reason is grounded in natural law and supported by 'the correct interpretation' of Christianity (Bernard Gert, *Hobbes* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), pp.110-17). Other commentators on Hobbes, however, share Rancière's emphasis on the linguistic, fictional, even self-deconstructing foundations of his commonwealth. See, for example, Philip Petit, *Made with Words. Hobbes on Language, Mind and Politics*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008) and Diego Rossello, 'Hobbes and the Wolf-Man: melancholy and animality in modern sovereignty', *New Literary History*, 43:2 (Spring 2012), 255-79.

14. It would certainly be possible to challenge Rancière's account of the democratic character of the European novel, arguing, as Emily O'Rourke has, that it is characterised by a 'formalism' that obscures 'the material history of the life of literature', its actual conditions of production, distribution and consumption (Emily O'Rourke, 'For the Love of Democracy: on the politics of Jacques Rancière's history of literature', *Qui Parle*, 22:1 (Fall/Winter 2013), 223-34 (p.231)). However, my concern here is less with assessing the accuracy of Rancière's version of literary history than with explicating the precise meanings and implications of his concept of 'literarity'. As will become clear in what follows, while the European novel provides, for Rancière, one exemplification of the phenomenon of 'literarity' at work, that phenomenon ultimately depends neither on the existence of the European novel nor on the validity of his characterisation of it.

15. See, Plato, *The Laws*, translated by T.J. Saunders, (London: Penguin, 1970), pp.307-10.
16. See, for example, Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, translated by L. Heron, (London: Verso, 1995), pp.63-92.
17. Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Five Lessons on Intellectual Emancipation*, translated by K. Ross, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), pp.63-4.
18. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, translated by R. Nice, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp.1-2. Subsequent references to 'Outline' will be given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
19. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, translated by R. Nice, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp.91-2, translation modified. Subsequent references to 'Logic' will be given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
20. Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, translated by R. Nice, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p.172. Subsequent references to 'Pascalian' will be given in parentheses after quotations in the text
21. For a summary of Bourdieu's account of the conditions of possibility of social or political change, see Jeremy F. Lane, *Bourdieu's Politics; problems and possibilities*, (London: Routledge, 2006), pp.54-75.
22. A number of anthropologists have made just this criticism of Bourdieu's idealised depiction of Kabylia, see Jane E. Goodman and Paul A. Silverstein, eds. *Bourdieu in Algeria*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).
23. Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, (London: Penguin, 2012), pp.82-3. Subsequent references to 'Twelve Years' will be given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
24. Blake Touchstone, 'Planters and Slave Religion in the Deep South', in John B. Boles, ed. *Masters and Slaves in the House of the Lord. Race and Religion in the American South*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988), pp.99-126. See also Eugene D.

Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll. The World the Slaves Made*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), pp.165-202; 245-55.

25. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2007), pp.174-75.