

# THE LOST THREAD: THE DEMOCRACY OF MODERN FICTION

*By Jacques Rancière, London: Bloomsbury, 2017*

ANTHONY CHRISTOPHER COUGHLIN

The first impression one gets on reading French political and aesthetic philosopher Jacques Rancière's *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction* is that it functions as a series of outtakes to his previous volume, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. All one would have to do is append the necessary extracts that were so critical to that previous volume's success, and then redistribute the essays in chronological structure. Instead, *The Lost Thread* is framed as an attempt to integrate works of what now would be called classical realism into the philosopher's notion of aesthetic modernism. Objecting to both the then-contemporary criticism of a variety of literary and theatrical works and structuralist (namely Barthes') readings of realist techniques, Rancière seeks to find a place for these works (and several already ingrained in other interpretations of modernism) into his uniquely democratic approach to modern aesthetics.

Of course, Rancière's "modernism" does not follow from conventional definitions, but rather aligns with what he calls the "Aesthetic Regime of Art," which has been his regular focus for the past seventeen years of his career. In his previous work, *Aisthesis*, Rancière's perspective sees modern art and modernism as less concerned with "the conquest of autonomy by each art, which is expressed in exemplary works that break with the course of history, separating themselves both from the art of the past and the

‘aesthetic’ forms of prosaic life” but rather with “the movement belonging to the aesthetic regime, which supported the dream of artistic novelty and fusion between art and life” that “tends to erase the specificities of the arts and to blur the boundaries that separate them from each other and from ordinary experience”<sup>1</sup>. Here, as in *Aisthesis*, Rancière thus seeks to forge a counter-history to the already established approaches to works of writers such as Baudelaire, Balzac, Conrad, Flaubert, Keats, and Woolf, among others. Rancière finds in these writers the shared emergence of a particularly democratic way of crafting aesthetics, of finding ways in which the viewpoint of the lower classes is brought into the same sensible fabric as those of the upper classes, or “a destruction of the hierarchical model subjecting parts to the whole and dividing humanity between an elite of active beings and multitude of passive ones” signalling a change in both the hierarchies of art as well as those of society.<sup>2</sup> However, Rancière is quick to point out that this new approach to aesthetics does not itself inaugurate a new regime of politics, but rather serves as the complement to the potential of a democratic spirit, which can be helped to realization when “disturbances of the fictional order make it possible to think through new relations” such as those between words and things, dreams and actions, etc. from “which forms of social experience and political subjectivation are woven.”<sup>3</sup>

The two most interesting of the book are those in which Rancière presents counter-readings to established theoretical models of interpretation, i.e. the reading of Flaubert against Barthes, and the reading of Baudelaire against Benjamin, and with Balzac. This work continues Rancière’s ongoing negotiations with Barthes, which in English translation, can also be observed in the late Phillip Watts’ fascinating, and unfortunately unfinished volume *Roland Barthes’ Cinema*<sup>4</sup>. Here, as in Watt’s work, Rancière primarily takes

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1 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul. (New York: Verso, 2013), xii.

2 *The Lost Thread*, xxxiii.

3 *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

4 Phillip Watts, *Roland Barthes’ Cinema*, ed. Dudley Andrew et al. (New York: Oxford University Press. 2016).

issue with the readings of the structuralist Barthes, setting his reading of Flaubert against Barthes' "reality effect." In Rancière's summary, which begins by singling out the detail of Madame Aubain's barometer in *Un coeur simple*, this effect asserts that the object's "usefulness lies precisely in its being useless. If an element is found in a tale without there being any reason for its presence, it is because this presence is unconditional; it is there simply because it is there" and that it "proves its reality by the very fact that it serves no purpose, and therefore that no one had any reason to invent it."<sup>5</sup> Rancière describes this observation, for Barthes, as being "akin to denouncing the way in which a social order is given in the evidence of what is simply there, natural and inviolable."<sup>6</sup> It is thus fundamentally no different from the critiques of Flaubert offered by his contemporary critics such as Barbey d'Aurevilly, who dismissed *L'Éducation sentimentale* as being nothing but a superfluous collection of details.<sup>7</sup> While both are obviously operating within quite opposed political paradigms, they both object to the unorganized procession of details. Rancière finds a much more interesting potential in this simple barometer, which marks "an upheaval in the distribution of capacities of sensible experience in which life doomed to utility is separated from existences destined for grandeurs of action and passion."<sup>8</sup> This ensures that even the "pitiable" heroine of *Un coeur simple* can experience "the grand intensities of the world" and can "transform the routine of everyday existence into an abyss of passion."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, for Rancière, "the purported 'reality effect' is much rather an equality effect."<sup>10</sup> Rancière's criticism of Barthes then focuses on the relationship between parts in the function of some determined whole, which for Rancière is no longer essential in modern fiction. For him "literature as a modern form of the art of writing is exactly the contrary. It is the abolition of the border

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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 6.

7 Ibid., 7-8.

8 Ibid., 13.

9 Ibid., 13-14.

10 Ibid., 14.

that had delimited the space of fictional purity.”<sup>11</sup> It is under this rubric of criticism directed towards both d’Aureville and Barthes that Rancière introduces the *kath’ hekaston*, the succession of facts as they arrive, in opposition to causal models of sensations. It is in Flaubert’s rendering of the *kath hekaston* [“a particular” Ed.] that for Rancière, he inaugurates the situation of the modern novel.

As mentioned, the other section to provoke the most interest is Rancière’s attempt to reframe Baudelaire’s poetry as following more from the work of Balzac and his conspiratorial characters (notably in the *History of the Thirteen*<sup>12</sup>) than following from the shock of modernism or the work of Edgar Allen Poe. Rancière sees in the traditional Benjaminian reading of Baudelaire a far too radical move that paves over the intricacies in the poet’s range of observation. He writes that Benjamin’s version of Baudelaire “swings over to the viewpoint of a ‘destruction of experience’ something that is much rather a modification in the system of relations between elements defining a form of experience: ways of being and doing, seeing, thinking and saying”.<sup>13</sup> In order to turn away from this impeding destruction of the sensible, Rancière finds an affinity between the work of Baudelaire and Balzac, whom Rancière posits as the proper predecessor to Baudelaire’s observations. Rancière explains that it was,

Balzac, who, far more than Poe, forged the Baudelairian gaze on the city and the crowd, provided the most brilliant illustration of it. The minutely detailed and hallucinatory description that begins *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* of the five circles of Parisian hell emerged as the masterwork of a new novelistic ethology.<sup>14</sup>

Immediately, we can notice a shift here from an emphasis on the shock of the experience of the city to a gaze that remains am-

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11 Ibid., 18.

12 Honoré de Balzac, *History of the Thirteen.*, trans. Herbert J. Hunt, (London: Penguin Publishing, 1975).

13 Ibid., 97.

14 Ibid., 100.

bivalent from it. We can also see, in the above observations, hints of a reoccurrence of the short-circuit between being and action that forms much of the basis of the book. This emerges again as Rancière attempts to remove Baudelaire from the experience of the man of the crowd, also separating him further from Poe, as Rancière explains that he wants “to limit the importance given to Edgar Poe and his ‘man of the crowd’, which the Benjaminian reading privileges because this man’s journey ends up at sites of the commodity and crime.”<sup>15</sup> Rather, Rancière pushes Baudelaire towards the “Balzac who experienced the inanity of that physiological or physiognomic knowledge and fictionalized the very gap between knowledge about society and the success of action.”<sup>16</sup> What emerges from this reading then is not Baudelaire as a man of the crowd, struggling against a changing and overwhelming society, but a voyeur whose gaze penetrates through the rampage of the masses to see the details that lurk underneath. This is a figure at a remove, not being compressed in the mixer of society, this “Baudelairian voyeur is the man who looks at the crowd from afar and on high, in a gaze that renders the latter indistinct” and can see the luminous existence of life that blooms in this space.<sup>17</sup> Baudelaire thus is able to locate distinct moments within the rush of the modern world and fold them into a universal sensible fabric, thus demonstrating that “modern beauty is not the ‘always the same’ Benjamin that obsessed over after his reading of Blanqui and that he saw emblemized in the phantasmagoria of Baudelaire’s *Sept vieillards*.”<sup>18</sup> The greatest hesitation when confronted with Rancière’s analysis of Baudelaire is whether he has salvaged from the poet the potential for a democratic reading or simply just re-inscribed him in a more Franco-centric discourse. Rancière’s refusal to engage with the cultural vicissitudes of his objects of analysis renders his observations somewhat homogenous despite the strength of his central premises.

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15 Ibid., 106.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 108.

18 Ibid., 109.

His analyses of Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and the novels of Virginia Woolf, follow from the concept of the *kath hekaston* and its coincidence with another term that Rancière, following Woolf by way of Conrad, labels the "luminous halo."<sup>19</sup> The "halo" is the decentering effect of modern fiction in which the content, the plot of the story, "which one seeks always on the inside, is to be found outside, 'around' the story. The luminous halo is not a diffusion of light from a centre. The central light is there, on the contrary, only to reveal the sensible power of the atmosphere amid which it is plunged."<sup>20</sup> This decentred subject, who no longer acts upon the atmosphere around him, but is merely the vessel for its sensible display, also resurfaces in the book's sixth chapter on "the theatre of thoughts," in which modern theatre is prescribed "to be fashioned by its relation to the invisible dimension surrounding it, through the partitions, doors and windows across which the unknown takes effect"<sup>21</sup>. These analyses are effective, even though they mostly seem to be a re-staging of the standard poststructuralist philosophical notions of the relationship between the inside and the outside reframed as an affirmation of the possibilities of sensible experience rather than as an irresolvable aporia. The section on Conrad, for example, can be viewed as either invigorating or problematic depending on one's point of view. While Rancière returns to the author an awareness of sensation that may have been previously overlooked, he spends little time examining the characters and contexts to whom those sensations belong, and thus his grand democratic aims perhaps end up allied to a colonizing discourse. While Rancière overlooks this representational discourse intentionally, it nonetheless ends up haunting his discussion of *Lord Jim*, and unsurprisingly, *Heart of Darkness*. His analysis of theatre, which returns to his criticism of Barthes and Brecht (from *The Emancipated Spectator*),<sup>22</sup> takes them to task for,

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19 Ibid., 29-30.

20 Ibid., 30.

21 Ibid., 131.

22 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot, (New York: Verso, 2006).

forgetting that the supposed theatre of identification was an internally divided theatre, one that already bore its own effects of estrangement, effects tied to the tensions between several plots and several manners of feeling its effect.<sup>23</sup>

As effectively as this rejoinder to the logic of passivity and action is, Rancière's conclusions regarding the relationship between "what is dream and what is true life"<sup>24</sup> – that replace the question of exiting the dream<sup>25</sup> – lack the clarity of his other writings throughout the book. The question of how to evade this simple logic, particularly in the theatrical space, is not sufficiently addressed.

The section on Keats that gives the collection its title is interesting, but far too bound up in the discussions of Schiller and his aesthetic program that has been discussed elsewhere in Rancière's work, particularly in *Aesthetics and its Discontents*.<sup>26</sup> The thread metaphor that emerges here is that of the spider who spins a web not to ensnare but to enchant. Rancière explains that "to spin the web is not to weave sensations into an embroidery likely to ensnare the reader" but to function as a "poetic disinterestedness" that "is the work of an imagination that continually takes from and gives to the common fabric."<sup>27</sup> While this is conceived as the poetic form of Schiller's "free play of appearances," the ideas here feel partially developed, and move away from both the concepts of the "luminous halo" as it is discussed in relation to Woolf and Conrad, and also the collision between dream and action as found in his discussions of theatre.<sup>28</sup>

*The Lost Thread* offers some interesting new examples of Rancière applying his observations on aesthetics and attempting to redeem or re-appropriate works that have been typically dismissed

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23 Ibid., 140.

24 Ibid., 141.

25 Ibid.

26 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steve Corcoran, (New York: Polity Press, 2009).

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

by left-leaning structuralist modes of criticism. Nonetheless, Rancière's focus on the modes of seeing engaged by the texts, rather than the cultural context from which they have emerged or into which he is putting them, renders his analyses somewhat homogenous – particularly in relation to his previous volume, *Aisthesis*. *The Lost Thread* is thus not a major work, but a continued demonstration of both the effectiveness and weakness of Rancière's presentation of aesthetics.