

Voices for the voiceless

DAVID WINTERS

Jacques Rancière

MUTE SPEECH
Literature, critical theory, and politics
Translated by James Swenson
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STAGING THE PEOPLE
Volume One: The Proletarian and His Double
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Volume Two: The Intellectual and His People
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Translated by David Fernbach
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With its leading lights now all but gone out, the fashion-conscious field of “French theory” stands in need of some new stars. At the moment, the main attraction is Jacques Rancière, subject of a swelling list of translations, and a darling not just of the anglophone academy, but also, increasingly, of the art world. While known for his link (and subsequent split) with Louis Althusser, Rancière may be more reminiscent of Michel Foucault. Like the latter, he’s often frustratingly opaque, but with flashes of counterintuitive brilliance, and a knack for turning commonplace concepts on their heads. His recent work has redescribed aesthetics in terms of a “distribution of the sensible”, probing into the politics of the way that art arranges perception.

The newly translated *Mute Speech* marks Rancière’s most sustained application of his aesthetic theory to literature, and to literary history. In broad terms, the book locates the birth of our current conception of literature in the transition from neoclassical to modern aesthetics. But Rancière isn’t retreading some tired routine about a naive realism overthrown by a revolutionary modernism. Rather, he argues, writing’s “representative” and “expressive” roles relate not to periods but to aesthetic “regimes” that overlap, and that aren’t always at odds with each other.

In the regime of French neoclassical poetry, writing is restricted by rules of decorum. Enacting a sort of analogy between texts and the social structure surrounding them, decorum distributes styles of writing inside a strict hierarchy of genres, anxiously measuring their appropriateness. As Rancière says, in neoclassicism “what is wrong is always unsuitable”. Yet this sets the stage for a paradigm shift; for the eruption of something unsuited to “the normative system of belles lettres”. As it turns out, Rancière’s favourite example of this is Victor Hugo’s *Noire-Dame de Paris*. What makes that book radical, Rancière claims, is its depersonalization of speech. That is, instead of decorously dealing out speech among speakers, it allows Notre-Dame to speak for itself, mutely, in its own unspoken “language of stone”. Uncoupled from any human source, this voiceless voice disrupts the order of things, setting a dangerous precedent. From now on, a notion of unanchored “absolute” writing will threaten the representative function of literature.

Rancière is refreshingly unorthodox in unearthing examples of “mute speech” not from modernism, but from relatively prosaic realist and naturalist novels. It isn’t the avant-

garde, but boring old realism that triggers the breakdown of genres into an “anarchy of writing”. Indeed, realist novels pioneer a new inappropriety, since they imply, for the first time, a writer who writes “for those who should not read him”. One wishes here for a few reflections on the nineteenth-century reading public; on the social correlatives of the rise of the novel. Unfortunately, when Rancière calls literature “democratic”, he’s guided not by a history of reading, but by his own, less relevant reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus*. On the back of a Socratic grumble about writing’s social disorderliness, he suggests that the written word is essentially revolutionary, given its errant tendency to float free of its origins, to circulate, and to lend itself to appropriation. But surely this slip into linguistic idealism reveals a weakness in his overall argument. A theory of “mute” speech can hardly afford much importance to real speakers and listeners, and one wonders how worthwhile it is to attribute more agency to writing than to those whose lives are linked with it. Isn’t literary history driven less by abstractions than by real reading and writing practices, demographic factors, and the pace of technological change?

For those who like a little more history with their theory, Verso’s two new volumes of Rancière’s earlier writings may be more gratifying. The essays that make up *Staging the People* are drawn from the legendary journal *Les Révoltes logiques* (1975–81), a short-lived forum for some fascinating work in French labour history. Halfway between academia and activism, *Les Révoltes* was set up to take stock of the political failure of May 1968. Returning to the nineteenth century, it sought to explore the explanatory gap between socialist theory and the reality of workers’ social movements. Rancière’s contributions to *Les Révoltes* reflect his concern to reconstruct the lived complexity of working-class culture, against the “austere proletariat of Marxist theory” – but also against romantic nostalgia.

The Intellectual and His People contains some remarkably sharp interventions against thinkers who misleadingly claim to “speak for” the masses. One notable essay attacks the so-called *nouveaux philosophes*, who led French culture’s break with the Left after the events of 1968. André Glucksmann’s manifesto for this movement, *La Cuisine*

et le mangeur d’hommes, is singled out for a skillfully savage review. Rancière ridicules Glucksmann’s reductive assertion that “Marx was responsible for the Gulag”, and goes on to show how such anti-Marxist rhetoric is no less dogmatic than the doctrine it purports to oppose. In Rancière’s view, Glucksmann and his allies merely exchange Marxism’s flawed model of the proletariat for their own equally naive notion of “the people”. Indeed the *nouveaux philosophes*, such as Pierre Bourdieu (who also comes in for criticism in this collection), belong to an intellectual lineage which, since Plato, has only spoken for the people by keeping them silent. In this tradition, the people’s real purpose is to underwrite the authority of their spokesmen. For Rancière, all of this serves to suppress historical truth. Glucksmann’s posturing is therefore “less important in what it says than in what it stops us from looking at . . . against its story, we should try to relearn our own history”.

The archival research recounted in *Staging the People* is rich in historical detail, ranging from the Californian gold rush to the Paris Exposition of 1867. The stand-out article is invitingly titled “Good Times, Or, Pleasure at the *Barrière*”. Here Rancière roams through the social spaces of nineteenth-century Paris, from the drinking dens of the city limits to informal “café theatres” where the bourgeoisie briefly mingled with off-duty workers. Complicating our orthodox picture of classes pitted against one another, the piece maps a “half-fantastic geography of inter-class exchanges” that blurs the boundaries between labour and leisure, high and low culture. An especially evocative section traces the way that song lyrics were transformed in their travels through the city, taking new shapes in the improvisations and interventions of the *café-concert* scene. In such situations, a worker could be “radicalised” by getting artistic ideas above his station. Thus, against a crudely oppositional counterculture, Rancière superbly reclaims the subtle disruptiveness of the parvenu, and the autodidact. Of course, such social slippages were just as subtly policed, and the *café-concerts* themselves were finally privatized via the gramophone, a device whose prerecorded pleasures put an end to “a thousand games of social theatricality”.

In retrospect, Rancière’s early scholarship adds some much-needed empirical meat to the bones of his mature, more theoretical work. Indeed, it might even help to historicize his abstract musings in *Mute Speech* on the rebelliousness of the “wandering letter”. *Staging the People* is particularly welcome in this respect, since its play of proletarian voices clearly and concretely illustrates how words can forge new distributions of the sensible. Perhaps it is telling, then, that this line of argument makes so much more sense when it is embedded in thick descriptions of social reality. One of the lessons of Jacques Rancière’s work, and one of the problems with which it reflexively contends, is that an account of the political power of language may be best supported by sources other than those drawn from the canons of literature, or, for that matter, of philosophy.

Elegies and epigrams

SARAH KNIGHT

David R. Slavitt, translator

MILTON’S LATIN POEMS
112pp. Johns Hopkins University Press.
\$60 (paperback, \$25); distributed in the UK
by Wiley. £31 (paperback, £13).
978 1 4214 0079 2

Switching from Latin to English in a student speech delivered at Christ’s College, Cambridge at the turn of the 1630s, John Milton began the poem now known as “At a Vacation Exercise in the College” with an emphatic “Hail native Language”. In the poem Milton characterizes English as the work of a child’s “first endeavouring tongue” but (typically) hints that it might fit “some graver subject” one day, and ten years later, in *The Reason of Church-government* (1641–2), he resolves “to fix all the industry and art I could unite to the adorning of my native tongue”. Yet Milton never exclusively committed to writing in English rather than Latin. In 1645 he published his *Poems of Mr. John Milton*, both English and Latin (with a separate title page for the Latin *Poemata*); in 1649 his accomplished Latinity propelled him into a job as Parliament’s secretary for foreign tongues; and many of his last publications were Latin pedagogical works, although several were written earlier in his life. Ignoring Milton’s Latin writing to frame him as a monoglot skews any accurate sense of his writing life, for he produced Latin works from his schooldays until his death.

Many Milton readers now need clear translations of these works, and over the past few decades editors and translators such as John Carey, Roy Flannagan, John Hale, Stella Revard and Estelle Haan have produced English versions of Milton’s Latin. The latest translator to “English” Milton’s Latin poems is David R. Slavitt, who organizes the poems into three parts, “The Book of Elegies”, “The Epigrams”, and “The Book of the Woods” (from the Latin “Sylvarum Liber”), a structure derived in part from the *Poemata* of 1645. These titles mark differences in metre, not content: “Elegiae” refers to elegiac couplets, not melancholic subjects, while “Sylvae” means a poetic miscellany, not rural matters. Diverse in their metrical forms, Milton’s Latin poems also cover an extraordinarily rich range of subjects: deaths of friends and dignitaries; the Gunpowder Plot; the bewitching talent of an Italian singer; Plato versus Aristotle; the approach of spring. Leaving out two epigrams, Slavitt translates the majority of the poems from 1645 and includes two more published in 1653 and 1673.

Milton’s variety of metres and subjects is challenging for any translator, and getting the tone right across individual poems is similarly demanding. Slavitt’s translation usually captures the literal sense of the Latin, but conveys the nuances of tone less consistently. Milton’s sly humour is often caught: his first elegy, for instance, describes violent plays witnessed at the London theatre, and the bloodthirsty vigour (with a hint of overwrought melodrama)

of his personification “cruentatum furiosa Traegodia sceptrum / Quassat” is rendered colourfully here as “Tragedy rages, waves her gory scepter”. Yet elsewhere, the translation sometimes diverges from Milton’s Latin, and such reorientations can push the reader away from a more nuanced understanding of the ideas and subjects Milton explored.

In the sixth elegy, for instance, the youthful speaker considers which classical poet is the most important model for his own writing, a complex judgement for someone deciding between Anacreon, Horace, Pindar, Homer and Ovid to make, and towards the end of the poem, he seems to favour Homer most for his frugality and self-control. He describes Homer as driving Odysseus through “freta longa” – literally, “long straits”; “far-stretching seas” – which Slavitt translates as “the wine-dark sea”. While this nod towards the well-known Homeric phrase might superficially seem apt, and while the words “freta longa” might not seem very distinctive, Milton, a powerfully attentive reader of Ovid, would have encountered it several times in his study of the *Amores* (2.11.5, a reference to the voyage of the *Argo*), *Heroides* (7.46, Dido’s letter to Aeneas) and *Metamorphoses* (8.142, Scylla’s reproach to Minos), three highly emotional moments at which the “freta longa” become sites of intense despair or hope for Ovid’s speakers. The speaker’s use of this Ovidian phrase to describe Homeric action suggests that his conclusion that sober epic is best may still be provisional, and that Ovid’s evocations of intense feeling still colour his imagination. The translation flattens out the interwoven strands of classical influence here, and a note explaining Milton’s allusion precisely would have helped, but the notes are relatively few and do not offer as much background as new readers in particular might need. As an undergraduate in 1626, for instance, Milton wrote his third elegy to mark the recent death of Lancelot Andrewes, preacher and Bishop of Winchester, but went on fifteen years later to attack Andrewes for his ecclesiastical stance in *The Reason of Church-government*. Far from being pedantic, a note on Milton’s shifting attitudes towards Andrewes and what he stood for would have helped the reader meaningfully to position the early Latin poem within the wider context of Milton’s ideological commitments.

In one of the epigrams on the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, too, the translation’s contemporary idiom jars against the Latin source. This four-line poem offers the paradox that Catholic Rome both wants to send King James down to hell by excommunication and to blow him up to heaven through the planned explosion. Slavitt’s final half-line – “It beats the hell out of me” – has no Miltonic counterpart. Milton mentions the River Styx and a hell-mouth in his second line, but makes clear the perplexing irrationality of Rome’s conduct through the poem’s central paradox, not through a first-person hands-in-the-air declaration of confusion which unnecessarily deviates from the Latin.

The invocation to *Paradise Lost* famously articulates the poet’s intention to soar, to write “things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme”, but a translator’s responsibility is different. Thinking again of how Milton describes writing in English in *The Reason of Church-government*, a translator certainly needs to rely on “industry and art”, but any adornments should not cloud our sense of the source.



Henry James (left) and his brother William, c.1900

Tap once for publish

Early in his career, Henry James asserted that “a man has a right to determine, in so far as he can, what the world shall know of him and what it shall not”. The “epistolary bonfires” that allowed him to exercise that right are legendary, but as Michael Anesko’s compelling new book shows, strenuous efforts to control James’s literary remains and shape his legacy continued long after his death.

The custodial figures range from proprietary relatives to eager editors and “biografiends”. They also include ghosts, who, at opportune moments, give shape to anxieties about faithful representation. While similar phantasmal presences in James’s tales help to stay the hand of the would-be biographer, in life they were curiously apt to encourage such endeavours. Nearly two decades after James died, his amanuensis Theodora Bosanquet – who had by then published various pieces on James and his working methods – received from her former employer a series of otherworldly communications. In one, James waves her “his friendly blessing” and, acknowledging her close attention to his “style”, asks to read her “little book” (*Henry James at Work*). This, he stipulates, should be left “unopened on the table” as “he can read through the covers of any book in the world”. Anesko sympathetically suggests that this posthumous attentiveness compensated Bosanquet for the dismissive treatment she received from Percy Lubbock and James’s family – this early period of James studies was, he suggests, overwhelmingly male-dominated.

Whether or not James would have approved of Bosanquet’s “little book”, he would surely have understood her desire for approbation. In answer to his nephew Harry’s outraged response to his liberal emendation of

MIRANDA EL-RAYESS

Michael Anesko

MONOPOLIZING THE MASTER
Henry James and the politics of modern literary scholarship
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William James’s letters, he wrote that he had felt the spirit of his philosopher brother at his elbow, entreating him not to “hand me over, in my raggedness & my poor accidents, quite unhelped & unfriended”. The claim seems particularly extraordinary in view of the fact that William – who shared Bosanquet’s interest in psychic communication – had requested that Henry should stay on with his widow Alice after his death in case he should attempt to transmit messages from beyond.

One of the virtues of Anesko’s reading of this famous, fraught exchange between Harry and Henry (of which only the latter’s twenty-eight-page response remains) is that it explains an important context that has often been missed: the financially astute Harry was not simply reacting to Henry’s creative treatment of William’s letters for *Notes of a Son and Brother*, but to news of two forthcoming Scribner’s articles, which were to present selections of these revised letters. This relates to Harry’s broader concerns that his uncle’s use of the letters would impinge on his own projected edition of his father’s correspondence. While Anesko’s account of these episodes is helpfully thorough, his non-sequential presentation of certain particulars and relegation of others to footnotes mean that it is not always as clear as it could be. This, however, is an isolated instance; in general, Anesko’s lucid, jargon-free prose in *Monopo-*

lizing the Master is a pleasure to read.

Anyone who intends to work on James will encounter the formidable figure of Leon Edel at an early stage. Before long they may become frustrated by the omission of sources in his “definitive” biography, or hear rumours of unproductive conversations with stern Harvard librarians, long accustomed to safeguarding Edel’s “priorities” in relation to the James family archive. But even those familiar with the legend will find Anesko’s description of the methods Edel employed to maintain his monopoly shocking.

Anesko draws much of his evidence from Edel letters that have only recently become available. These show an eagerness to thwart or discredit other scholars that sometimes led to self-exposure. In a desperate attempt to suppress H. Montgomery Hyde’s *Henry James at Home* (1969), Edel claimed that Hyde had lifted material wholesale from his biography, brandishing his own incompetence as evidence: “He duplicates all my little errors in my quotations”.

As those who have worked on James’s letters will know, these transcription errors – which Anesko has carefully corrected – are all too frequent. Other extracts demonstrate how this “publishing scoundrel” played on the James family’s anxieties (regarding James’s sexuality, for example) in order to prevent competitors from laying hands on documents that he hoped eventually to cash in on. For Michael Anesko’s Edel is motivated as much by profit as by prestige, and here as elsewhere, the study is informed by the author’s ground breaking work on James and the literary marketplace as well as a wealth of more recent findings. The engaging yet incisive handling of this material makes this a book that will be read for years to come.

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