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# Book Review

## Universal Life:

A review reading of

***The Lost Thread: The Democracy of  
Modern Fiction* | Jacques Rancière**

(London: Bloomsbury, 2017)

**Reviewed by Robert Boncardo**

### Abstract:

This article introduces Jacques Rancière's *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction*, a book that has not yet been the object of extensive scholarly discussion. Working through the arguments from each of the book's six chapters, I offer suggestions as to how Rancière's readers might take up *The Lost Threads* analyses of some of modernity's greatest writers.

Jacques Rancière's *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction*,<sup>1</sup> published by Bloomsbury and ably translated by Steven Corcoran – one of contemporary Continental philosophy's most industrious translators – represents a summation and extension of Rancière's longstanding work on modern European literature. It brings together essays that have already appeared – albeit in different forms – on Virginia

Woolf,<sup>2</sup> John Keats<sup>3</sup> and Charles Baudelaire,<sup>4</sup> along with entirely new essays on Joseph Conrad (a hitherto absent presence in Rancière's work) and modern theatre. In the present article, I work through the book's main arguments and clarify them, with a view to building a firmer basis for future work on Rancière and on the literature he has studied. I also want to suggest some key points where readers might take up his arguments.

*The Lost Thread* has already received some close scholarly attention. David F. Bell's beautifully written chapter, 'The Music of the Indistinct', included in the recent edited collection *Understanding Rancière, Understanding Modernism* (Bloomsbury, 2017), details the book's main arguments and offers critical suggestions as to how Rancière's insights might be extended.<sup>5</sup> By contrast, *The Lost Thread* is barely mentioned in two other recent works of collective scholarship on Rancière: Oliver Davis' *Rancière Now* (Polity, 2013),<sup>6</sup> and Grace Hellyer's and Julian Murphet's *Rancière and Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).<sup>7</sup> The book nevertheless warrants much closer attention than this oversight suggests, and I intend in what follows to extend and deepen Bell's existing exegesis. But do Rancière's English-language readers really need another primer on his thought, as this article purports to be? It is true that in recent years there has been a veritable explosion of secondary scholarship on Rancière.<sup>8</sup> That said, there are two compelling reasons for offering an exegesis of *The Lost Thread*. The first is that while each of the book's six chapters offers an overarching account of a modern writer's work, they nevertheless deal with only a limited number of individual works and touch on very few textual details. Much work therefore remains to be done verifying Rancière's readings and applying their principles to parts of his favourite writers' work where he has not yet ventured. But such work nevertheless requires getting a clear sense of the claims Rancière is making. This brings me to my second reason for offering an exegesis of his book. As with all of his works, *The Lost Thread* is written in Rancière's inimitable style, which weaves together images and words from the writers he is presently studying to form a kind of impersonal literary-critical fabric where Rancière's own voice seems to fade and where something like a common or collective voice comes to the fore. This swirl of sensory detail can often make it hard for his readers to identify his books' argumentative structure. This is no accident: Rancière has frequently spoken of his debt to writers like Virginia Woolf who are able to subtract – or make altogether vanish – the logical connection between their phrases; a technique that chimes with Rancière's own distrust of totalising explanations, in particular social scientific ones, which purport to connect discrete events according to a logic only they can discern.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless Rancière's books are always subtended by a solid argumentative structure; the only difficulty lies in identifying what it is. This article is my own attempt at doing just that.

Some general remarks about the book are in order, beginning with a comment on the book's title. Rancière borrows and adapts the figure of *The Lost Thread* from Woolf's novel *The Waves*. There, the character Bernard speaks of "a wandering thread, lightly joining one thing to another", which he contrasts with the "incoherence"<sup>10</sup> that otherwise seems to characterise his life. For Rancière, Bernard's "thread" figures narrative structure in the broadest possible sense: the connective tissue that joins life's events together by means of an Aristotelean logic of probability or necessity (LT xxxi).<sup>11</sup> *The Lost Thread* studies what happens when this narrative "thread" disappears or becomes frayed and disconnected following the downfall of the "representative regime of art" in post-Revolutionary Europe. In *The Lost Thread* this "regime" – one of Rancière's most famous conceptual constructions<sup>12</sup> – is most frequently referred to as the "regime" of "representational poetics" (LT 8, 9, 10, 17, 34). Derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*, "representational poetics" defines art in terms of the representation of plots: that is, of law-governed sequences of action carried out by characters whose capacities are similarly law-governed (LT xxxi). The question Rancière's book asks is what modern fiction can be if "fiction" has hitherto been defined in these Aristotelean terms. In *The Lost Thread* Rancière explores the diverse answers an exemplary group of modern novelists, poets and playwrights have given to this question. Beginning with chapters on Flaubert, Conrad and Woolf, he goes on to study the way the poets Keats and Baudelaire have confronted this challenge, before concluding with an exploration of modern theatre from Victor Hugo to Georg Büchner, Henrik Ibsen to Maurice Maeterlinck. I will retain the order of Rancière's presentation in what follows.

### **"The Texture of the Real": Gustave Flaubert**

*The Lost Thread's* first and longest section, 'The Lost Thread of the Novel', is divided into three chapters. They address, respectively, Barthes' reading of Flaubert; Conrad's novels; and Virginia Woolf's novels and critical writings. Rancière's remarks on these novelists nevertheless begin in his book's 'Foreword', to which we can turn briefly. On the opening page of *The Lost Thread* Rancière reprises a gesture he has previously performed in such works as *Mute Speech*<sup>13</sup> and *The Politics of Literature*.<sup>14</sup> Drawing on the writings of reactionary critics grappling with exemplarily modern writers like

Flaubert and Conrad, Rancière cites Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's furious retrospective on Flaubert's novels<sup>15</sup> and an anonymous review of Conrad's *Lord Jim* published in *The Queen, The Lady's Newspaper*.<sup>16</sup> As always, Rancière is not interested in extracting some sort of self-congratulatory pleasure from witnessing these critics' discomfort in the face of Flaubert's and Conrad's novelty, as if what was original in these authors was obvious to everyone save the most hardened of literary traditionalists. On the contrary, Rancière reverses this progressive commonplace: the "revolution" of modern literature, he writes, "was not achieved through manifestos" (LT xxx) or the noisy proclamations of those who took themselves to have broken the history of literature in two. Rather, it occurred silently and imperceptibly, "via shifts in writing practices" (LT xxx) that confounded their authors as much as they did the latter's critics. For Rancière, literary traditionalists like Barbey d'Aurevilly are often better placed than self-ordained revolutionaries to register these "shifts". Thus, on the opening page of his 'Foreword', Rancière shows a striking similarity between these two conservative reviews written twenty years apart: both use a physiological metaphor to convey the deformities of Flaubert and Conrad's creations. According to *The Queen's* reviewer, Conrad's novel "lacks vertebration":<sup>17</sup> it consequently remains paralysed, unable to coordinate its parts and move purposefully towards a conclusion. Similarly, Barbey d'Aurevilly accuses Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* of failing to be a book in the first place; that is, of failing to be "organised and developed" and capable of "march[ing] towards its dénouement".<sup>18</sup> Both reviewers thus identify traditional narrative structure with the functional unity of a human body. In *The Lost Thread* Rancière brings this homology to the fore in a way that other works of his have not. As he has previously argued,<sup>19</sup> traditional critics like Barbey d'Aurevilly believed that the kind of totality a work of art was meant to instantiate was that of an "organic totality" (LT 8), a form advocated by Aristotle in his *Poetics* but whose features were first defined by Plato (LT 8). Rancière insists on the metaphorical link between this formal structure and the conception of an "organic body with well-coordinated, functional limbs" (LT 103). Traditional fiction, Rancière argues, was normed by the ideal of a body primed for efficacious action: to write a story with a beginning, middle and end – all bound together by intelligible causal chains – was simultaneously to convey the virtues of a self-directed body, its "muscles primed for action" (LT 103). And not just for any action: the body presupposed by this identification was a *classed* body, one belonging to a higher humanity capable of pursuing grand ends and acting "at the level of the totality". It was not a merely "mechanical" body belonging to a member of humanity's lower

rung and capable only of reproducing itself “day to day” (LT 8). But why did this identification occur in the first place? The answer given implicitly by *The Lost Thread* – but given more explicitly in *Mute Speech*<sup>20</sup> – is that for those powerful people who typically consumed its products, Aristotelean poetics offered a model of how to refashion the social and political world in conformity with one’s will. As Rancière writes, in “the classical age” the space of dramatic action was “the very concrete site in which men who were supposedly expert in the art of speaking and of acting through speech [took] pleasure in the on-stage representation of that power” (LT 121). Thus, when modern literature dismantled the totality of traditional narrative structure, one effect was that the kind of grand and purposive action mentioned above was also put into question. This is the basis of one of Rancière’s chief arguments in *The Lost Thread* regarding the political reception of modern literature. If critics as distinct as Maurras and Sartre have been equally troubled by modern literature, it is because this literature attested to the breakdown of the kind of totalising political action that could restructure society in light of their political values. In other words, while such action could be an ideal for both political progressives and reactionaries, the body implied by modern literature was fundamentally disadapted to it. Consequently, Barbey d’Aurevilly’s and *The Queen’s* reactionary reviews not only echo each other, they also resonate with Sartre’s *What is Literature?*, a classic work of progressive criticism.<sup>21</sup> Understanding Rancière’s reformulation of the politics of modern literature involves hearing the common chord that these right- and left-wing critics’ have played.

The first chapter of *The Lost Thread*, ‘Madame Aubain’s barometer’ – named after the improbably famous household item from Flaubert’s *A Simple Heart* – offers us a first chance to hear this chord. It addresses Roland Barthes’ critique of nineteenth century French realism. Many of the arguments made in this chapter will be familiar to readers of *Mute Speech* and of the essay ‘Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed’.<sup>22</sup> The chapter’s novelty lies in Rancière’s demonstration of the way his reading of Flaubert reverses Barthes’ purportedly progressive critique. In his 1968 essay ‘The Reality Effect’,<sup>23</sup> Barthes had argued that Flaubert’s descriptive efforts on the opening page of *A Simple Heart* were not designed to showcase the author’s virtuosity: the objects mentioned, namely a “piano”, “books”, “boxes” and a “barometer”,<sup>24</sup> were too banal for this purpose. Instead, they were geared towards producing a “reality effect”. Rancière describes this effect as follows:

Such is the at once simple and paradoxical logic of the reality effect. The usefulness of the useless detail is to say: I am the real. The real has no need, in being there, to have a reason for being there. On the contrary, it proves its reality by the very fact that it serves no purpose, and therefore that no one had any reason to invent it (LT 5).

For Barthes, the “real” whose incorrigibility Flaubert’s fiction was allegedly defending was a “real” that not only required no explanation in terms of “function” or “purpose”, but in fact resisted explanation in any terms whatsoever. In other words, the “real” was the point where explanation ended – where the person questioning it had to confront it in its absolute and uncontested evidence. If Flaubert included a description of Madame Aubain’s house at the opening of *A Simple Heart*; and if this description included everyday household objects such as a barometer and a heap of boxes; and if, finally, the mention of these objects served no narrative “purpose” whatsoever, then it was because Flaubert wanted to make the world of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie and its clutter of commodities appear “real” in the sense given above. In *A Simple Heart*, this world was consequently one whose existence could not be questioned, and certainly not overthrown. Barthes therefore concluded that Flaubert and his “realism” were complicit with the bourgeoisie’s strategic pursuit of hegemony.

Rancière rejects both the politics of Barthes’ essay and its analysis of Flaubert’s novel. First, he asks why Barthes thought Flaubert’s novel was guilty of “descriptive excess” (LT 17) on its famous opening page. What was the proper role of description such that *A Simple Heart* could be seen to go beyond it? For Barthes, Flaubert’s description of Madame Aubain’s house was “excessive” with respect to the “narrative functions” that he thought fundamentally structured Flaubert’s short story: the “chains of causality” (LT 23) linking the various moments of its action. As Rancière will show, this answer actually betrays a profound aesthetic conservatism on Barthes’ part. Ironically, however, in 1968 Barthes’ structuralist analyses were the height of modern critical scientificity. Furthermore, at the political level Barthes’ discovery of the autonomy of literature’s structures gave him a ready-made directive for future progressive literature: that of producing a “signifying process” that would “posses[s] its own autonomous logic” (LT 5–6) and not be subordinate to the bourgeoisie’s version of the “real”. For Rancière, by contrast, Barthes’ “modernity” (LT 16) and his political radicalism were anything but: far from working in favour of an emancipatory literary theory, the author of ‘The Reality Effect’ misrecognized the properly egalitarian

moment of *A Simple Heart*. He also misrepresented the specific “texture of the real” (LT 16) that was at stake in it.

To make his case, Rancière first draws attention to the fact that the story’s main character, Madame Aubain’s servant Felicity, while obviously subordinate in social function to her mistress, nevertheless possesses “an intensity of passion far surpassing her mistress’s own capacity for emotion” (LT 14). For Rancière, this makes Felicity a clearly identifiable member of “the population of [modern] fiction” (LT xxxi). This population included characters similar to Felicity such as Flaubert’s Emma Bovary,<sup>25</sup> Balzac’s Véronique Graslin,<sup>26</sup> or the Goncourt’s Germinie Lacerteux (LT 15). All of these women, Rancière argues, were members of the “little people” (LT 11), who nineteenth-century fiction frequently represented as being capable of thinking, feeling and acting in a manner that transgressed the boundaries of their socially-assigned role. By staging such characters, modern fiction attested to the confusion that had occurred in the democratic age between the “souls of gold” and the “souls of iron” (LT 12), to use the Platonic vocabulary Rancière often invokes. It was not simply that modern fiction brought previously vulgar characters onto the stage of literature, as reactionary critics such as Armand Pontmartin complained (LT 11). Rather, “the ill [ran] deeper still” (LT 12) since books like Flaubert’s *A Simple Heart* and *Madame Bovary* tended to erase the very distinction between a higher and lower humanity, thereby suggesting the effective existence of a single humanity capable of an infinite range of experience.

This allows us to better understand the function of the barometer from the first page of *A Simple Heart*. As Rancière shows, this barometer does indeed have a “function”: it helps establish Felicity’s character. Yet it does so in two completely irreconcilable ways. On the one hand, by marking “variations of climate and temperature” (LT 13), the barometer seems consistent with the life of a servant lived according to the repetitive rhythms of household tasks and their daily and seasonal variations. On the other hand, given that Felicity’s experiences provoke extraordinary passions in her, the barometer also stands for the way the changing intensities of nature could now spark all manner of thoughts and feelings in the most anonymous of characters. Rancière writes:

The needle of the useless barometer marks an upheaval in the distribution of capacities of sensible experience in which life doomed to utility is separated from existences destined for the grandeurs of action and passion. The humblest, most nondescript being is henceforth granted the grand intensities

of the world: it has the ability to transform the routine of everyday existence into an abyss of passion, whether this passion is directed at a young man or at a stuffed parrot (LT 13–14).

If Flaubert's short story represents a "real", then it is not the "real" of a bourgeois world attempting to affirm its perennity. It is a "real" riven by an irreducible conflict between a consensual logic and a dissensual logic. The first, which is the logic of Aristotelean and later French neo-classical poetics, ties a character's social position to their capacities and regulates the relation between experiential stimuli and the actions that should follow them. The second, which is proper to modern fiction in its true novelty, holds that "any" sensation can trigger in "any" person whomsoever "the vertiginous acceleration that opens [them] up to experiencing the depths of passion" (LT 14). Modern fiction thus confounds all hard-and-fast distinctions between different kinds of people and the thoughts and feelings proper to them. Of course, this second, dissensual tendency inevitably runs up against the conservative and essentialist premises of the first: just as Felicity remains a servant until her death, so do Emma Bovary's adventures end with her suicide. Rancière describes this conflict as a "dialectic" lying at the heart of modern literature; a "dialectic" that contrasts with its "monist" (LT 62) ontology, which posits a single level of impersonal sensory events experienced by a generic – and no longer hierarchized – humanity.

Instead, then, of staging a "real" structured by "causal relations of necessity or verisimilitude", modern literature presents a far more flee-floating "real", one lacking any intrinsic teleology and constituted less by well-formed characters and their worlds and more by pre-personal events without any necessary causal connection between them. Yet as we have just seen, this "real" can never exist in perfect abstraction from the narrative structures that a novel is obliged to instantiate. Indeed, much of Rancière's critical attention in 'The Lost Thread of the Novel' is devoted to identifying the various and always volatile "compromises" (LT 24, 27, 40) that authors like Flaubert, Conrad and Woolf make between "the great democracy of sensible coexistences" and "the old order of causal consequences" (LT 13), but also between their character's transgressive capacities and the demand that some social hierarchy still be maintained. If modern literature combats the cause of social equality, then it is not by "petrify[ing] everything" so as to nullify the forms of "social praxis" engaged in by the "oppressed" (LT 6), as Sartre once argued. Such a process of "petrification" is in fact a mistaken way of identifying modern fiction's dissolution of the generic causal links between the moments of a character's actions. But nor is it by making



the world of high capitalism seem “real” in Barthes’ sense. Instead, the modern novel manifests its conservatism when, for instance, Flaubert makes Emma Bovary’s actions the effect of a causal power of which she is unaware, or when Woolf curiously doubles the cause of Septimus Smith’s madness in *Mrs Dalloway* – a device we will study more closely when we turn to Rancière’s third chapter. To continue with Barthes’s reading of *A Simple Heart*, we can now understand Rancière’s striking claim that the structuralist critic and left-wing radical faced “the same scandal that the champions of representational poetics faced” (LT 17) when reviewing Flaubert or Conrad. This claim matches Rancière’s equally counter-intuitive argument, which he has made many times before, regarding the parallels between Sartre’s progressive manifesto *What is Literature?* and the reactionary critics of the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> But this time, the political paradox is doubled by a theoretical one: by equating the literary work’s structure with “fundamental narrative relations” (LT 3), Barthes’ structuralism had in fact reprised the core of the “representational poetics”. As Rancière reminds us, the essence of a work of fiction for Aristotle was never to be an “imaginary world” (LT xxxi) distinct from the real world. Nor was it to be an “imaginary world” that attempted, as per Barthes’ reading of Flaubert’s “realism”, to represent the “real” world in its “outright self-evidence” (LT 5). The Aristotelean definition of fiction is indifferent to these distinctions. Rather, a work of fiction was always defined by its instantiation of some plot-like logic that “construct[ed] forms of co-existence, succession and causal linkage between events” (LT xxxi). This means that despite its apparent theoretical novelty, the unfolding of a structure in Barthes’ modern sense, no matter how “autonomous” this structure might be, did not differ essentially from the way a generically-defined plot unfolded within “representational poetics”. In fact, structuralism *is* “representational” insofar as it sees literary works as *re*-presenting an ideal narrative structure. Thus, when Barthes or his collaborators from the avant-garde journal *Tel Quel* called for a literature that would assert its own “autonomous logic” (LT 6), they were not being progressive, but conservative. As Rancière has argued since *Mute Speech*, art’s plots have *always* been autonomous; they have always had a time and space proper to them.<sup>28</sup> What is truly radical about modern literature is the way it undoes the causal connections between the moments of these plots to the point that it renders the very category of the “possible” *qua* the intelligible link between one moment and the next inoperative. As Rancière will demonstrate in the case of Conrad, what remains of three categories of “the possible, the real [and] the necessary” (LT xxxi) is thus an all-

devouring conception of the “real”: a multiplicity of events that come from nowhere, lead nowhere, yet assert themselves in their brute being.

### “Everything is Possible”: Joseph Conrad

Long-time readers of Rancière will be familiar with the arguments presented in ‘Madame Aubain’s barometer’, even if they are directed here against a new target. Yet the novelty of this first chapter also lies in how Rancière reprises his reading of Flaubert so as to frame the difference between the French novelist and one of his most famous heirs, Joseph Conrad, a writer he has previously not addressed. As is well known, Conrad was a fervent admirer of Flaubert, to the point that some critics have read him as a desperate imitator of the French novelist’s style. Rancière’s reading, which makes up his book’s second chapter ‘Marlow’s Lie’, is distinguished by the way he separates the two. To introduce his reading, at the close of ‘Madame Aubain’s barometer’ Rancière reprises the central argument from his 2008 essay ‘Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed’. In key episodes from *Madame Bovary*, such as Emma’s first meeting with Charles, her courtship with Leon, or the dawns of her love for Rodolphe, Rancière sees two distinct series of events interfering with one another: on the one hand, a love story peopled by characters deeply invested in reproducing the causal logic that such a narrative should follow; on the other hand, a string of micro-events, of discrete and pre-individual sensations and percepts that proliferate without ever cohering – the agile leg of an insect, a bubble made by a small wave, the rustle of a dress, a pile of yellow dust into which a flower has decomposed.<sup>29</sup> As Rancière points out, while this latter stream of events constitutes the true focus of the modern novelist’s attentions, the first narrative logic eventually wins out, even if the characters who incarnate it are no longer centres of agency since their affects are no longer the “intimate dispositions of individuals” but rather “chance-ridden condensations of a whirlwind of impersonal sensible events” (LT 22). This transformation in the ontology of character is not enough to prevent *Madame Bovary* from following a well-trodden narrative trajectory: the second series of events appears only in “the interstices” (LT 25) of the story.

With this division in mind, Rancière can show that the difference between Flaubert and Conrad lies in the way Conrad replaces Flaubert’s interstitial inscription of “the great impersonal equality of sensible events” (LT 25) with a literary metaphysics that makes these events surround, halo-like, the adventures of his characters. In the ‘Foreword’ to *The Lost Thread* Rancière presents Conrad as a

writer who, thanks to the passage of time, was more aware of the novelties of modern literature. Before him, Flaubert had fretted about the seeming lop-sidedness of *Madame Bovary* in terms of the amount of space devoted to the action's "picturesque, grotesque and psychological preparatives".<sup>30</sup> As Rancière shows, Flaubert's anxiety stemmed from the fact that he occasionally judged his book from the perspective of a "representational poetics" that his 1856 novel had actually undone. Thus, while the former poetics demanded that psychology and atmosphere be established so that a generically-defined character could then act in accordance with the traits outlined and within the milieu described, Flaubert's novel had "erased, line after line, the very gap between the immateriality of thought and the materiality of action" (LT xxviii). The new fiction no longer needed to make the character's psychology a mere prelude to actions carried out in accordance with this psychology; nor need it use atmosphere as a springboard to the development and resolution of a plot's conflict. Instead, it could dwell on both of these without any narrative impulse carrying them toward a determinate future. Having arrived after Flaubert, Rancière argues that Conrad was more certain of the artistic legitimacy of his novels' "vagabondage" (LT xxviii). His literary metaphysics also helped him ground his artistic sensibilities. Rancière claims that Conrad gives expression to this metaphysics through the mouth of Conrad's famous narrator, Marlow, for whom "the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine".<sup>31</sup> But what is this "atmosphere", and how is it distinct from Flaubert's "whirlwind of impersonal events" (LT 22)? The "atmosphere" Conrad's stories evoke is defined in total opposition to the schemas of action promulgated by the narratives of "representational poetics". Instead of a milieu in which characters act in a calculable manner, Conrad's "atmosphere" – Marlow's "misty halo" – allows for no intelligible relations between causes and effects. It is the "real" in its pure purposelessness, at once full of sense since constituted by innumerable sense events, but senseless since none of these events allows for any necessary or dependable connection between them. For the same reason, the "real" is timeless, immobile: unlike the projects of Conrad's intrepid protagonists, it possesses no forward movement – no inner dynamism that could move it towards a determinate future – but instead remains perpetually "present" (LT 40). This allows Rancière to gloss Conrad's 1896 letter to T. Fisher Unwin, where the novelist writes: "Everything is possible – but the note of truth is not in the possibility of things but in their inevitability. Inevitability is the

only certitude; it is the very essence of life – as it is of dreams”.<sup>32</sup> In reading Conrad’s letter Rancière again identifies the category of the “possible” with a causal connection between events as per the plots of “representational poetics”. But note that this conception of “possibility” is very closely tied to a specific conception of “necessity”: that is, if it is “possible” for an event to follow an anterior event, then this implies that it will follow it in a “necessary” – definite – way, even if this fails to eventuate. Now, while Conrad’s “inevitability” seems to imply necessity, it is of a very different kind to the conception of necessity we have just sketched. For Conrad, there are no intelligible relations in the universe, even if his characters catch fleeting but always false glimpses of meaning. Rather, as Rancière explains, Conrad’s “real” is “a set of conditions [...] whose ultimate connection escapes all mastery” (LT 35). Nothing can be planned, nothing can be depended upon: if the “note of truth” is heard only when a novelist presents the “real” in all of its “inevitability”, then “inevitability” stands for our complete inability to chart a course on the ocean of the “real” by means of calculation or prediction. Whatever happens to us happens regardless of our desires or ends. Jim’s experiences in the novel that bears his name are “inevitable” not because they followed a predetermined path, but because they were completely unpredictable. Conrad allows Jim no recourse to a knowledge that might have allowed him to increase his chances of success. In short, to predict what is “possible” is a perfectly human act, one consistent with the behaviour of a “desiring and chimerical being” (LT 43). But it is ultimately futile.

For Rancière, all of Conrad’s novels work to evoke this bleak backdrop of meaninglessness, this “great nebula of sensible states” (LT 40). While his protagonists rush headlong into their adventures, this immobile, indifferent milieu remains ever-present. In fact, it remains “present” in two different senses: first, it is ineliminable; second, it is motionless and thus infinitely refractory to action. That said, Conrad’s characters are constantly forging illusions for themselves about this “real”. As Rancière contends, the “stories Conrad tells all pertain to a fundamental scheme: they are always born of an appearance, an illusion, a mistake”:

*Lord Jim* narrates the miserable fate of an individual dream of heroism, *Heart of Darkness*, that of the great civilising lie of the colonial enterprise. *Nostramo* is the portrait of a man who accepts to be paid solely in looks of admiration. *Under Western Eyes* develops the consequences of an optical illusion: in the reserved air of a student who dreams only of academic medals,

revolutionaries persist in seeing the depth of thought of a soul complicit in their grand designs (LT 35–36).

Of course, all of these “illusions” ultimately come undone. Indeed, in Conrad’s meticulous decomposition of the moments of his characters’ action, such as in his description of Jim’s jump from the *Patna*,<sup>33</sup> we catch a glimpse of the impersonal “sensible fabric” (LT 36) that actually constitutes the milieu his characters mistake for a stage of action subject exclusively to their will. Rancière remarks that despite the apparent similarity between Conrad’s and Flaubert’s styles – both seem to present a concatenation of disconnected sensory events and episodes – Conrad refuses to make these events cohere in terms of a narrative logic. While in *Madame Bovary* the “atmospheric dynamic of sensible accidents [was] inserted into the logic of the plot [...] in accordance with the modality of wish-fulfilment, or possibility” (LT 39) – Emma’s hand eventually surrendered to Rodolphe’s (LT 22) – in *Lord Jim* no logic presides over Jim’s leap into the *Patna*’s lifeboat. No logic, that is, save a dream logic: whence Rancière’s remark that “the ultimate truth of the real” in Conrad consists in “its indistinction with dream” (LT 38). Both his characters’ illusions and the milieu that contradicts them are woven from the same indifferent cloth.

While Conrad rejects Flaubert’s “compromise” between the narrative logic of “representational poetics” and modern literature’s dissolution of this logic, Rancière points out that the form of the novel still imposes upon him the necessity of an ending. And yet there can be “no good ending” (LT 45) for a novelist who believes that the “real” possesses no temporal or logical dynamism that could justify a conclusion. As Rancière remarks, novels like *Lord Jim* and *Nostramo* all seem to end by means of a *deus ex machina*, which alone is capable of bringing them to a close (LT 41). An exception, however, is *Heart of Darkness*, whose final scene is Marlow’s visit to Kurtz’s fiancée. As Rancière points out, by telling the fiancée that Kurtz’s final words were her name – thus ending the narrative on a tragic but intelligible note – Marlow betrays the truth of *Heart of Darkness*. But this deliberately deceptive note on which the book ends demonstrates in a negative manner that any narrative structure betrays Conrad’s “real”. This is “Marlow’s lie” – a “lie” that nevertheless tells the truth about the irreconcilable conflict at the heart of modern fiction (LT 47).

## “The Shower of Atoms”: Virginia Woolf

Just as Rancière’s comparison of Flaubert and Conrad allows for a new way of conceiving of both their similarities and dissimilarities, so does his third chapter, ‘The Death of Pure Ramsay’, help us understand Virginia Woolf’s work as another singular solution to the problems modern literature poses to anyone who dares write it. Doubtless Rancière’s readers have long anticipated that he would write an article exclusively devoted to Woolf. On a number of occasions in his career Rancière has signalled his debt to the author of *Mrs Dalloway*. In a 2008 article, for instance, Rancière claims that Woolf inaugurated a model of writing that helped him escape, in composing his first major work, *Proletarian Nights*, the causal models of the historical sciences.<sup>34</sup> Prior to ‘The Death of Prue Ramsay’, Rancière had offered only a brief reading of *The Waves* in his 2008 essay ‘Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed’.<sup>35</sup> In *The Lost Thread*, by contrast, Rancière contextualises Woolf’s novels in terms of the respective strengths and weaknesses of Flaubert and Conrad’s work. As he puts it at the opening of this third chapter, in order “to make the luminous halo” that Conrad evoked “shine” – and not have it obscured by the falsities of narrative – then one possible strategy was to avoid Conrad’s vast and sprawling adventures and focus instead on the smallest-scale plot imaginable: “the simple proceedings of a day or of a life” (LT 49). This is Woolf’s strategy, as Rancière sees it. Yet it brings with it its own specific challenges. For even if Woolf often sets her stories in a domestic, familial sphere, Rancière claims that “the tyranny of the plot is itself a family affair” (LT 50). Thus, in a novel like *To The Lighthouse* the characters of Mr and Mrs Ramsay instantiate paternal and maternal logics respectively, both of which betray life’s impersonal “shower of atoms” (LT 50):

The plot in *To The Lighthouse* is led by Mr Ramsay, who in the first part rules out the possibility of making the crossing, before going on in the third, to impose its necessity. But aside from the frank tyranny of the father, deciding what the day to come commands or prohibits, there is the soft, binding tyranny of the mother. [...] It arranges the great layer of coexistences that is opposed to the authority of links. But this is done in order to otherwise adapt it to the familial order, by reducing the anarchic shower of atoms to the small things and miracles of everyday life (LT 50).

While Mr Ramsay commands in such a way that he structures the actions both of himself and of those around him, in particular his son James Ramsay, Mrs Ramsay initially appears capable of celebrating life's discrete sensory events by transforming them into domestic pleasures. But this constitutes another kind of betrayal, one that isolates and degrades the "life of the soul". For this "life", Woolf argues in *Modern Fiction*, is not homogenous with the steady routines and fake proprieties of the domestic sphere; it is made up "of an always changeable shower of sensible events" (LT 28). Rancière contends that the character of Lily Briscoe is best understood as someone who attempts to break with both of these familial tyrannies. But as an author, Woolf also sets out to do this. Her most ambitious attempt is to be found in the second part of *To The Lighthouse*, 'Time Passes', where the reader becomes a witness to changes occurring in the Ramsay's empty holiday house. In this second part of the novel, the events of the family's life are placed in parentheses. One of these events is the unexpected death of the Ramsay's daughter Prue – an event that gives Rancière a title for his chapter. Indeed, if Rancière accords this event so much importance, it is because he questions whether by placing it in parentheses Woolf truly succeeded in subordinating it to a fictional logic that sought to give primacy to the stream of pre-personal events. Is Prue Ramsay's death a parenthesis in the infinite course of this stream, or is this stream itself manifest only as a parenthesis positioned between the main points of a fictional plot? Rancière's answer is clear: "The sensible milieu of fiction does not unfold its purity except as the milieu of a plot, a transition between its beginning and its end" (LT 53).

In line with his remark that modern fiction's action is always "dialectical" (LT 62) – it can never omit a plot-like structure, even if this structure conflicts with the truth of life – Rancière claims that Woolf's novels always stage distinct ways of resolving or attenuating this antagonism between "the shower of atoms" and the "arrangement of actions" (LT 55). His reading of Woolf reaches a climax with his discussion of *Mrs Dalloway*. In fact, a note of admiration can be detected in Rancière's comments on the way Woolf goes beyond Flaubert in her 1925 novel's presentation of "the infinite democracy of life" (LT 59). While the concatenation of pre-personal events had somehow coalesced in Emma Bovary's case to make her act according to "the logic of narrative and social identities" (LT 57), Clarissa Dalloway's afternoon walk through London allows these events to remain autonomous:

Far from bringing the spectacles of the city within her subjectivity, they retain their autonomy as sensible events, opening up an indeterminate space of

subjectivation. They enable the narration to displace the line of the tale onto a multiplicity of anonymous lives that, for a time, receive a name and the possibility of a story (LT 57).

It is significant that Rancière claims here that it is only the “*possibility* of a story” that is produced by Clarissa’s encounters with the swarm of sense events around her. In *Mrs Dalloway* the lives of London’s anonymous multitudes are never submitted to a narrative structure: “By contrast”, Rancière writes, it is “[Clarissa’s] own personal agenda [that] gets lost in the indeterminate circulation brought about by the spectacle of the street, the loops of a plane or the echoes of a song” (LT 58). The sense of volition expressed in the novel’s opening line – “Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself”<sup>36</sup> – is thus immediately undercut. The molecular democracy of the “aesthetic regime of art” is put on display in a hitherto unprecedented way.

Despite this achievement, Rancière suggests that Woolf reprises in her own way the notorious Flaubertian gesture whereby a new hierarchy is inscribed in the midst of this sensible democracy. As readers of ‘Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed’ know, Flaubert’s protagonist was condemned to death for having equated art and life in a false manner, one far inferior to the author’s.<sup>37</sup> By attempting to recreate in her own life the narratives of love and passion she had read about in books, Emma failed to see that the true identity of art and life lay in the very dissolution of these narrative structures; more precisely, in the way Flaubert’s sentences could show, beneath the smooth surface of life, the indifferent and eternal flux of atoms. *Mrs Dalloway* includes a character who suffers an almost identical fate: Septimus Smith. Just as Emma had glimpsed in her own way the aesthetic potential in all things – her collection of elaborate furnishings and knick-knacks of every description attested to this realisation – so is Septimus alive to the sensible democracy surrounding him: “the quivering leaves in the rush of air, the swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, or round and round with perfect order, the sun dazzling with its soft gold now this leaf, now another, or the chime of a horn on the grass stalks” (LT 60). But Septimus’ benign paranoia leads him to misinterpret these sense events and to subordinate them to a religion of universal love whose “Chosen One” is none other than himself. Woolf’s elitism – like Flaubert’s – becomes evident in the way she frames the causes of Septimus’ demise. Most fundamentally, Septimus’ death is caused by the contradiction between the demands of narrative and the unwieldy multiplicity of sense events, since it shows that it is impossible to ever synthesise “the



truth of the shower of atoms and the misleading logic of plots” (LT 67). But this contradiction is also said to arise out of Septimus’ “madness” (LT 61), which is initially said to have been induced by his experience of war. As Rancière points out, Woolf was nevertheless not content to restrict the causes of Septimus’ “madness” to these two perfectly sufficient points – one structural, the other psychological. Rather, the cause of Septimus’ death “is exemplarily doubled” (LT 63 – *modified trans.*) by Woolf: Septimus is not only mad, he has also been diverted from his proper social trajectory by reading books not proper to a man of his station. His death is therefore framed as the tragic but inevitable destiny suffered by one who, like Emma Bovary, had read books that were not destined him. There is something suspicious in this superfluity. Woolf’s literary democracy cannot abide political democracy.

What is to be done with Rancière’s readings of Flaubert, Conrad and Woolf? In my view, the analyses of ‘The Lost Thread of the Novel’ each call for extensive development. In fact, in their current form they might even be considered hypotheses since Rancière seldom sets out to verify them with extensive textual evidence. This task can nevertheless be taken up by others. For instance, Rancière’s remarks about the function of illusion in Conrad and the narrative structures that result from his characters’ misapprehension of the real could be applied to each of his novels in turn, following Rancière’s own suggestions (LT 35–36). The same goes for his comments on the way Woolf’s novels are always singular solutions to the problem of how a narrative can inscribe life’s “shower of atoms” (LT 55). In extending Rancière’s analyses, his readers might also do something he rarely does: namely, describe the minute textual mechanisms that allow for the simultaneous linking and delinking of sensible events that occurs in these writers’ work. Rancière has offered a model of what such a description might look like in his close analysis from *Mute Speech* of the use of free indirect discourse, verbal tenses, pronouns and conjunctions in *Madame Bovary*.<sup>38</sup>

### “A Grand Democracy of Forest Trees”: John Keats

The second part of *The Lost Thread* takes us from the modern novel to modern poetry. It includes two chapters, on Keats and Baudelaire respectively. Both have already appeared in almost identical forms in English. The first chapter on Keats, titled ‘Spider’s work’, contrasts starkly with the chapters that make up ‘The Lost Thread of the Novel’. For not only does the person of John Keats constitute an almost perfect instantiation of those exemplary characters that populate Rancière’s writings

– characters who verify their equality by taking up art forms that their social positions otherwise prohibit them from producing; Keats' poetry itself also meets with apparently complete approbation from Rancière. While he had tracked Flaubert and Woolf's deviations from egalitarianism to elitism, Rancière hasn't a single critical word to say about Keats. Indeed, Rancière aligns him with his erstwhile hero, Joseph Jacotot. Despite being separated by time, space and profession, Rancière claims that "something is commonly affirmed in them" (LT 86): a thought of equality as an act that involves verifying people's equal intelligence.

Rancière's engagement with the British Romantics goes back to his extraordinary essay 'From Wordsworth to Mandelstam: The Transports of Liberty', published in *The Flesh of Words* but first presented as part of his 1992 seminar on the politics of writing at the Collège International de Philosophie.<sup>39</sup> While Wordsworth reappears in 'Spider's Work', it is as a counterpoint to Keats, a poet Rancière has never before written on, however surprising this may seem given their obvious affinities. To elucidate Keats' politics, Rancière first offers a lesson in how to conceive of the relation between politics and poetry. He begins by insisting that Keats' social milieu – the circle of radicals in which he moved – does not offer any clear indication as to the politics present in his poetry. He then dismisses two common yet contradictory misconceptions about Keats' politics in the critical literature. Taking the poem *To Autumn* as a sounding board, the first misconception sees the divinity of Autumn "sitting careless on a granary floor", or lying "on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep, / Drowsed with the fume of poppies",<sup>40</sup> as an image of an "ageless beauty proclaiming its self-sufficiency" (LT 72) and thus its autonomy from the cut-and-thrust of politics.<sup>41</sup> The second reads the poem's images of natural fecundity as a sign of Keats' support for a popular justice that would distribute equally the fruits of the collective's labour.<sup>42</sup> Rancière, by contrast, claims that both of these misconceptions miss the singular synthesis that Keats' poetry effects between passivity and activity. *To Autumn* itself presents a number of examples of this "identity of contraries" (LT 73). For instance, Autumn is said to be both the "season of mists" but also of "fruitfulness" (Rancière will explain further on how the mists' obscurity is equated in Keats' mind with the ideal conditions for creativity); and the "furrow" that the divinity was working on is said to be only "half-reap'd" – a sign of activity giving way to passivity. If we are to understand Keats' politics, Rancière suggests, we first need to understand the full significance of the way his poetry blurs the boundaries between activity and passivity. But crucially, the sort of politics this renewed understanding gives us access to is not a politics in the sense of a radical, liberal or conservative politics.

*Pace* Nicholas Roe, it does not allow us to situate Keats' poetico-political position in the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre. Rather, it is a politics in a more expansive sense of a term: that of a specific conception of the way people should be organised in a community and of the capacities that correspond to them. Rancière explains the significance of Keats' "suspensive activity" (LT 77) as follows:

not only does it arrest the hand that takes, the act that orders and the brain that imposes the will of the powerful; it annuls the hierarchy of ends that, since time immemorial, had divided the world into two between those who could have no end other than the day-to-day reproduction of their existence and those who, being sheltered from this vital constraint, could conceive more ample ends, invent their means and risk undertaking them. These latter could, for the same reasons, just as easily do nothing or else dedicate themselves to activities that were their own end. Indeed the supreme good consisted precisely in this. Well, aesthetic capacity puts this privilege of the chosen at the disposal of all... (LT 77).

By laying low the "hierarchy of action", which Rancière describes as the "core" (LT 7) of "representational poetics" and of the unequal social order it instantiated; and by replacing the latter's idea of wilful and law-governed action with the concept of "negative capability" – a capacity "not to conclude, not to decide, not to impose" (LT 74); and finally by extending this capacity to "all", Keats envisaged "a possible relation between humans" (LT 74) that broke irremediably with all of the axioms that could sustain a hierarchical distribution of the sensible. In a post-Revolutionary context, it was now in principle possible for anyone to become "the ruler of Europe" (LT 76). But for Rancière and Keats, this conquest of power simply reproduced the schema of action that lay at the heart of the previous regime. True equality was instead manifest "in the fact of not acting or rather of rendering action inactive and inaction active" (LT 76). Keats puts this equality to work in the construction of his poetry. As Rancière explains, the poet works like a spider, but one whose webs have no predatory function: Keats links together – using subtle, evanescent threads – all manner of diverse materials: "fabulous tales, trails of clouds or the song of a thrush, and evocations of distant times and countries". For Keats, what is important about these materials is their "availability": anyone can make use of them to thread their own "chain of equivalences". But this means that his own poems can only ever be "points of departure" (LT 79) for the reader. The unity of activity and passivity implied by

“negative capability” prohibits the author from imposing a meaning upon his audience, as a spider would trap a fly in its web. If Keats’ poetry frequently includes scenes of indolence and dreaming, of shadows and phantoms, then it is because of the gentle yet productive confusion they invoke: “If shadow is bereft of form’s affirmed perceptual certitude”, Rancière writes, “its power of evoking stories and vanished worlds is better able to nourish the work of the web” (LT 80). With as little force of compulsion as possible, Keats’ poetry works to set the reader off on their own autonomous project of diligent indolence.

By clarifying the nature of Keats’ conception of “negative capability” – the heart of his politics and poetry – Rancière marks a distinction between the young Romantic and his senior counterpart, William Wordsworth. As Rancière explains – and as Keats realised – Wordsworth might well have seen all beings, whether high or low, as equal insofar as they were all “image[s] of the divinity” (LT 84). Yet he gave himself *qua* poet the privilege of being able to discern this equality, and in a sense to grant it: “the great equality of all and of all beings that the Lake poets proclaimed allows only one superiority to subsist in the world: that of the poets who’ve proclaimed it” (LT 82–83). Here Rancière compares the Wordsworthian walker, who could discern “sublime thoughts” in every vagabond or pedlar that he passed, with Keats’ experiences during his travels in Scotland in 1818. Not only did Keats encounter nothing but mud, rain and exhaustion on his journey, far from playing the role of the poet capable of discerning the “active principle”<sup>43</sup> in all things – including vagabonds and pedlars – he himself was mistaken for such a lowly character.<sup>44</sup> For Keats, Wordsworth’s “equality” was just another form of hierarchy. But what could possibly oppose it? This is the point at which Rancière turns briefly from Keats to Jacotot in order to underscore their similar conceptions of equality. Both saw equality less as a state and more as an act – or indefinite series of acts – that sought to verify people’s equality of intelligence. Equality was manifest only in ever-renewed efforts to show that there was an effective path leading from one’s existing capacities and knowledge to any other capacity or body of knowledge, no matter how circuitous this path might turn out to be. Keats’ poetry – indeed his very conception of poetic activity as a broader subset of human action – works less to actualise an already existing equality, such as the one represented by the mark of the Christian creator in each of His creatures, and more to produce it. Somewhat unlike Jacotot, however, in Keats’ universe the person attempting to verify their intelligence is not spurred on by a teacher. Rather, they are moved – and move others – by way of the singular blend of activity and

passivity proper to Keats' poetry: "negative capability".<sup>45</sup> This is the sense of the following passage from Keats' famous letter to Reynolds:

An old Man and a child would talk together and the old Man be led on his Path, and the child left thinking – Man should not dispute or assert but whisper results to his neighbour, and thus by every germ of Spirit sucking the Sap from mould ethereal every human might become great, and Humanity instead of being a wide heath of Furse and Briars with here and there a remote Oak or Pine, would become a grand democracy of Forest Trees.<sup>46</sup>

This image of a community of equals whose relations are as little infused with force, compulsion or calculation as possible, is the core of Keats' politics. When read after the three chapters of 'The Lost Thread of the Novel', each of which showed the complex dialectic pitting equality against hierarchy in the modern novel, the question raised by 'Spider's Work' is how Keats' poetry manages to escape this dilemma. The answer to this question cannot rely on the distinction between lyric poetry and the novel, however, since Wordsworth's poetry, on both Keats' and Rancière's readings, implied a position of mastery. What is the scope of the dialectic of modern fiction if it is not manifest in the work of one of modernity's greatest poets? Readers of Rancière's Keats might well take up this question, at the same time as considering how the philosopher's interpretation of Keats' famous "negative capability" can shed light on individual poems. While Rancière makes some remarks about the nature of Keats' imagery, in particular his use of paradox and figures that convey a kind of productive confusion (LT 80–81), much more can be done to identify the use of this imagery in individual poems and to extend his insights to matters of prosody as well.

### **"Aesthetic Republicanism": Charles Baudelaire**

Rancière's chapter on Baudelaire, 'The Infinite Taste of the Republic', engages with the dominant Benjaminian reading of the author of *Les Fleurs du mal* and attempts to shift the burden of explanation for Baudelaire's poetic novelties away from the Marxist account developed by Benjamin and towards his own understanding of the downfall of "representational poetics". As Rancière explains, Benjamin had sought to "link the thematic and rhythm of Baudelairean poems directly to an anthropological given constitutive of modernity: that of the 'loss of experience' produced through market reification and through encountering the big city and the crowd" (LT 96). In

other words, all of the markers of Baudelaire's modernity had to be traced back to mutations in social relations under industrial capitalism. For Rancière, however, Benjamin's reading is just another example – similar to those of Lukacs (LT xxxii) and Sartre (LT 6) – where the social scientific concept of “reification” is put to use in order to bring the characteristics of modern literature back to a single – and social – cause: commodity fetishism. Of course, Rancière is perfectly aware of how Benjamin transformed Marx's theory of fetishism. He is also conscious of the debates concerning Benjamin's problematic fidelity to the Marxist tradition.<sup>47</sup> Yet as he argues in his 1996 essay ‘The Archaeomodern Turn’, Benjamin not only retains the teleological conception of collective emancipation proper to Hegel and Marx, his reference to commodities *qua* an “original phenomenon”<sup>48</sup> reproduced two key features of the social sciences: firstly, that of silencing the voices of historical actors in favour of making “mute” things speak instead; and secondly, that of granting himself *qua* these things’ “interpreter”<sup>49</sup> the unique privilege of drawing out their meaning – a privilege Alison Ross claims is ultimately “arbitrary”.<sup>50</sup> Rancière's engagement with Benjamin in ‘The Infinite Taste of the Republic’ extends this critique to the German philosopher's famous reading of Baudelaire, which can be found in such essays as ‘The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’ and ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’. Before exploring Rancière's engagement with the author of the *Arcades Project*, it is worthwhile briefly sketching the broad parameters of his critique of the social sciences, since it constitutes a consistent concern in *The Lost Thread*, one present from the very first pages of the ‘Foreword’ (LT xxxi–xxxii).

As he had first done in *Mute Speech*, in *The Lost Thread* Rancière turns the tables on everyone from Lukacs to Bourdieu by arguing that the social sciences, far from being capable of explaining literature's genesis, actually draw their “conditions of possibility” from the “literary revolution itself” (LT xxxi). Intriguingly, in the first English-language version of the essay ‘The Politics of Literature’, Rancière makes this argument with reference to Benjamin and Baudelaire:

Marx's commodity stems from the Balzacian shop. And the analysis of fetishism can account for Baudelaire's poetry, since Baudelaire's loitering takes place not so much in the passages of the Parisian boulevards as it does in the same Balzacian shop or workshop. The symptomatic reading that underpins the practices of historical or sociological interpretation was first of all a poetical revolution.<sup>51</sup>

In my view, Rancière has never made it entirely clear why the social sciences' "symptomatic readings" are subordinate to the advent of modern literature. The vague account he gives in *The Lost Thread* matches the one he has previously given in *Mute Speech* and *The Politics of Literature*: namely, that the social sciences could only come into being once literature had "blurred the ancient opposition between the causal rationality of poetic fiction and the empirical succession of historical facts" (LT xxxi–xxxii).<sup>52</sup> Thanks to literature, the world of the everyday was not only a worthy object of study, it also came to be seen as an expression of a power – that of the social whole itself – that could be studied by way of its component parts. But does literature's foundational rupture prohibit the social sciences from subsequently developing their own epistemological capacities? And could these capacities not include the ability to account for literature's social genesis?<sup>53</sup> In the 'Foreword' to *The Lost Thread* Rancière claims that the social sciences "pay a price" (LT xxxii – *modified trans.*) for their misapprehension of their relation to modern literature. This "price" appears to be the fact that their all-purpose concept of "reification" fails to capture the essence of modern literature. Given that in Marxism reification constitutes an effect of social relations under capitalism, if literature evinces signs of reification then it must be because it is an "expression of social processes" (LT xxxi) – the locus of the social scientists' expertise. Yet by seeking out a concept that would allow them to derive literature from social processes – and thereby secure their epistemological mastery – social scientists have hastily adopted the concept of reification without first understanding the true novelty of modern literature. Paradoxically, for Rancière, the scientists' pursuit of intellectual superiority has left them incapable of forging a true idea about their object of study.

Irrespective of all the necessary caveats about Benjamin's own criticism of the historical sciences,<sup>54</sup> Rancière's arguments also apply to Benjamin's use of "reification" to comprehend Baudelaire's poetry. Indeed, Rancière's arguments against Benjamin in 'The Infinite Taste of the Republic' are so trenchant that it must be conceded he no longer agrees with his own abovementioned assessment from 'The Politics of Literature', where he held that Benjamin's "analysis of fetishism can account for Baudelaire's poetry".<sup>55</sup> For not only does the concept of "fetishism" load the dice in favour of the social scientist's epistemological mastery over the writer, it also mistakes the true cause of Baudelaire's innovations. As we have by now come to expect, for Rancière this true cause is not social or economic, but nor is it exactly intra-*literary* in nature. Rather, to be as precise as possible, it is intra-*fictional*: that is, it has to do with the downfall of the causal logic governing the finite number of

accepted narrative plots. For Rancière, discerning the consequences of this collapse of “representational poetics” in Baudelaire’s writings provides a much surer way of getting to grips with their politics and aesthetics.

In sketching his own account of Baudelaire’s politics and aesthetics, however, Rancière clearly has other critical opponents than Benjamin in his sights as well. Sartre is once again a target; but so too is any critic who reduces Baudelaire to a political reactionary perpetually pouring scorn on progressive or revolutionary ideals. Sartre famously argued that Baudelaire’s poetry was an expression of his personal cowardice and political nihilism. As he wrote in his 1946 book *Baudelaire*, poetry “attracted [Baudelaire] because it allowed him to exercise his freedom without any danger”. He therefore preferred “poetic creation” to “every form of action”.<sup>56</sup> For Rancière, however, Sartre’s opposition between poetry, on the one hand, and action on the other, misses what is truly at stake in the collapse of the Aristotelean conception of action in aesthetic modernity: “It is not dream that breaks with action”, he writes: “Instead, the promotion of dream results from the divorce accomplished between knowledge and action” (LT 101). We will see the meaning of this claim in what follows. Most important for the moment is the fact that what results from Baudelaire’s “promotion of dream” is not any sort of elitism, but rather an “aesthetic republicanism” (LT 96) that the poet remained faithful to throughout his life, including in his period of political reaction. Rancière will devote some of the most exciting pages of *The Lost Thread* to studying the way an entirely novel conception of “reverie” emerges in Baudelaire’s work on the basis of a reconceptualization of the possibilities of action. His conclusion will be that Baudelaire’s “reverie” does not involve some “withdrawal into the inner world of one who no longer wants to act because reality has disappointed him” (LT 105), as Sartre had argued. Rather, it names an entirely novel mode of engagement with the world, one better adapted than traditional “action” to the modern world’s specific beauty.

To show how Rancière reaches this conclusion, we can take up his argument at the point where he explains, in one of the clearest theoretical passages in *The Lost Thread*, the downfall of the Aristotelean conception of action:

Action, as is well known, is not simply the fact of doing something. It is a mode of thought, a structure of rationality that defines both a norm of legitimate social behaviours and a norm of composition of fictions. Such was the Aristotelian arranging of actions linked through bonds of causality according to necessity or verisimilitude. The rationality of action corresponds to a certain



form of the whole: that constituted by a denumerable and coherent set of relations — relations of coordination between causes and effects, of subordination between centre and periphery. Action requires a finite world, circumscribed knowledge, calculable forms of causality and designated actors. Now, this limitation appears lost to Balzac's contemporaries and successors. The problem is not that the world has become too prosaic for elite souls to find satisfaction in it. It is that it has become too vast, and that knowledge has become too subtle, too differentiated for action to be able to find in it the suitable conditions of rarity (LT 101–102).

The mention of Balzac's name in this passage is not accidental: as Rancière remarks on a number of occasions in 'The Infinite Taste of the Republic', critics have overstated the importance of Edgar Allan Poe for Baudelaire, both in terms of the influence of his essay 'The Philosophy of Composition', which he translated, and in terms of his conception of the "crowd". Instead, it is Balzac who is Baudelaire's true master. However, it is not the Balzac who presents an ethology of Paris that is most important to Baudelaire: it is another Balzac; or rather, it is the same Balzac, but this time with the emphasis placed less on the great novelist's pseudo-scientific descriptions of the types inhabiting Paris' boulevards and buildings, and more on Balzac's demonstration of the "inanity" (LT 106) of this knowledge. This is the point where we see the true significance of the "divorce" between knowledge and action mentioned above. For Rancière, Balzac is one among many nineteenth century novelists obsessed with the failure of action. His characters, just like those of Goethe, Stendhal, Flaubert and Tolstoy, frequently fail in their endeavours, and often in the most absurd of ways. If a knowledge of society exists, then this knowledge is not possessed by the subjects who act within that society. Instead, it is knowledge of the gap between the true causes of a subject's destiny and the illusions they operate under. This is the insight that matters most to Baudelaire: on the one hand, the subject is now "an infinite network of sensations" – and not, as it was in the "representative regime", a body served by a will that could perfectly coordinate all of its organs; and on the other hand, the world now "exceeds all closure of the field of strategic action" (LT 105).

Rancière then proceeds to show how Baudelaire formulates two contradictory responses to this challenge. The first takes seriously the directives given in Poe's 'The Philosophy of Composition'. If the relation between literary cause and effect is now so uncertain – even intrinsically unknowable because inexistent – then the best the

poet can do, following Poe, is to “control [...] all elements of the poem” such that a determinate “excitation” (LT 103) is produced, albeit momentarily, in the reader. Yet as Rancière points out, if this determinate cause and effect relation seems to reprise a key characteristic of “representational poetics” – that of a regulated causal relation between a narrative’s movement and the audience capable of appreciating it and deriving pleasure from it – then this appearance obscures the profound transformation that has taken place. In “representational poetics”, if a determinate effect was to be produced in an audience, then it was necessary for the artwork to follow the rules for linking one moment of a narrative’s action to the next. This regime of causality was then related metaphorically to a certain image of the body as a functional unity: “the organic body with well-coordinated, functional limbs” (LT 103). By complete contrast, the body supposed by Baudelaire’s Poe-inspired poetry is a mere bundle of sensations without any unity. If one is to have an effect on this body, then it can only ever be “a short excitation” (LT 104) destined to dissipation in the infinite and unpredictable series of sense events this body can undergo. Previously, the category of the will was linked to efficacious action in the world; now it is nothing but “the act of its [own] self-exhibition” (LT 104) in the ultimately purposeless project of having a determinate yet momentary impact on the disorganised body of the modern subject.

Baudelaire eventually abandoned this project. Indeed, his practice of “reverie” and his singular way of encountering the city grew out of a recognition of this project’s failure. Here Rancière launches his clearest critique of Benjamin’s interpretation of the poet:

It is here that the gaze on the city and the urban experience become meaningful. In order to grasp this, it is necessary to relativise the radical novelty that Walter Benjamin, in order to make it coincide with the age of industrial capitalism and commodity fetishism, attributes to the urban experience of Baudelaire’s contemporaries. This urban experience is not that of curious *flanerie*, which instead belongs to the age of Sébastien Mercier and Rétif de la Bretonne. Nor is it that of the traumatising crowd. And it is probably necessary 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 (LT 105–106).

*Pace* Sartre, Baudelaire's challenge is not to assert his aristocratic distance from the vulgar multitude. Nor is it to achieve "the heroic transcription of a devastated experience" (LT 97) in the wake of capitalism's generalised reification, as Benjamin had argued. It is to formulate a new kind of beauty faithful to the dissolution of identities and the undoing of cause-and-effect relations, both of which are proper to the modern city and to the "aesthetic regime of art". This allows Rancière to distinguish Baudelaire's experience of the crowd from the one given expression by Poe in *The Man of the Crowd*.

The Baudelairean observer does not embark, as does Poe's, in pursuit of characters who have struck his gaze, not even the passing woman that he might have loved. To follow her would be to denude her of what made her aura, namely not some apparition of the distant or some death blow, but very simply the past conditional as the mode and tense of the *fugitive*, mode and time of an appearing that is not merely ephemeral but is above all divested of the properties that render so prosaic any 'dear soul' from the moment it has consented to follow you (LT 108).

What does the "fugitive" mean here, and how is it linked to the past conditional tense and to the abstraction of an entity's properties? For Rancière, what unifies Baudelaire's chosen objects of poetic reverie is not the fact that they belong to a corrupt and twilit world. It is that they all live in "a floating world" (LT 107) where the clear lines of division between social identities have been erased. They are therefore "fugitive" insofar as any identity they have is destined to fade away: they are "forms that erase themselves until they are no more than a dream" (LT 109), or visions of what "would have been" had the dreaming observer been able to fix them with his gaze for longer than a moment. As with his reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, Rancière seems impressed by the way Baudelaire's "reverie" preserves the autonomy of his subjects – a project helped by the use of windows as modes of access that both reveal yet preserve the mystery of the subjects behind them. Baudelaire observes the city from his window, yet what he sees is not a world he can rationally master, let alone cover with a blanket contempt. What he sees are other windows behind which anonymous beings live out unknowable lives, such as the "wrinkly woman" from 'The Windows' who leans "over something indefinable and whose face, clothing and confused gesture permit a story to be made up" (LT 110). Reverie names the invention of possible lives for the enigmatic beings one encounters fleetingly in the modern city.

At the close of 'The Infinite Taste of the Republic', Rancière suggests that his account of Baudelaire's "aesthetic republicanism" should not be used to reduce the poet's work to a single sense: Baudelaire remains a poet "who had multiple faces and roles" (LT 113). In my view, what those inspired by Rancière's reading might do is draw new lines of division within Baudelaire's writings, identifying those poems and prose pieces that correspond roughly to the period of his discipleship to Poe, and those that move towards a practice of "reverie". They might also take up Rancière's remarks on how Baudelaire's critical writings often show a greater lucidity than his poetic practice and move more quickly than his creative works do towards his "aesthetic republicanism" (LT 104–105). Lastly, they may wonder what Baudelaire's "republicanism" implies for his precocious political engagement and his subsequent reactionary views. A new Baudelaire might then emerge, one beyond both Sartre and Benjamin's interpretations.

### **"The Double Plot": Modern Theatre**

The final chapter of *The Lost Thread*, 'The Theatre of Thoughts', is focused not on any individual playwright so much as on modern theatre in general. As is the case with his interrogation of the modern novel and modern poetry, for Rancière the "modern" in modern theatre names the period subsequent to the downfall of "representational poetics". In this final chapter, Rancière centres his investigation on the effects this change in regime had on the following three categories effective in the theatre: thought, speech and action. What is "thought" in modern theatre if dramatic action is no longer structured by – as it was in Aristotle's conception – a "wholly intellectual schema" (LT 121) defined by "relations of causality" (LT 120)? As Rancière recalls, it was by transforming the theatre into a space where rule-governed actions took place that Aristotle saved it from Plato's condemnation (LT 120). But what sort of "thought" or "intellect" can the theatre manifest once these intelligible relations have been disbanded? This leads Rancière to his second question: what can "action" be if modern theatre's characters can no longer depend upon the calculations Aristotle's logic made possible? Finally, if action traditionally occurred in the theatre by way of speech – dramatic action, Rancière reminds us, was once reducible to "a joust of discourse" (LT 121)<sup>57</sup> – then what is "speech" if it is no longer an effective tool for transforming the world or expressing a character's sovereign will?

Rancière begins his reflections with a short vignette of an evening spent as a fourteen-year-old in 1954 watching the *Théâtre national populaire's* performance of

Shakespeare's *Richard II*. The sense of this memory is not immediately apparent, so it is worthwhile unpacking its various elements. Rancière first remarks on the various distinctions between Jean Vilar's theatre and the state theatre, the *Comédie Française*. While at the Salle Richelieu – the *Comédie Française's* primary venue – the audience had varying degrees of access to the stage relative to the quality of their seats, at the Palais de Chaillot “you were sure to get a good view of everything, regardless of how much you had paid for your ticket” (LT 115). Secondly, instead of the sober sound of a bell announcing the start of the performance, at the *Théâtre national populaire* trumpets were used to summon the audience to their seats. For Rancière, this concern for the equality of all the spectators, coupled with the trumpets' pomp, signified that the audience was about to witness “the spectacle of a certain grandeur” (LT 116). This was a “grandeur” proper both to the theatre itself and to the common people assembled to watch it. Indeed, Jean Vilar's theatre was part of a long series of post-Revolutionary attempts to return the theatre to the “sovereign people” (LT 118).<sup>58</sup> That the play Rancière saw that evening chronicled the downfall of a king reinforces the sense of an historical progression leading ineluctably to the people's assumption of their rightful place on the stage of history. However, one of the chief insights of ‘The Theatre of Thoughts’ is that the conception of the “people” promulgated by the *TNP* and similar ventures is not at all self-evident. The “people”, Rancière insists, is not something that can simply appear once kings and queens have left the stage. In fact, the first sign of trouble comes with this 1954 performance of *Richard II* itself. As Rancière narrates, “one moment remains engraved in my mind, namely when the actor who portrayed Richard II – and who at this time was also the embodiment of radiant beauty and generous youth – addressed those faithful to the monarch in these terms: ‘My friends, let us sit down on the ground and recount the lamentable end of the kings’”. “At that moment”, Rancière continues, “the large space available for action's unfolding and for the resonance of words shrunk to this small circle of discussants, who let the action simply plan on, abandoning it to itself” (LT 116). The key point here is not so much that a story of a king's destiny was now being dissected by a crowd of ordinary people, even if this strange relation between the audience and the dramatic action – indeed between the actors themselves and the characters they embodied – undoubtedly marked a rupture with the circle of reciprocity that used to exist between a play and the elite public appropriate to it.<sup>59</sup> The point of this episode is rather that the status of theatrical action has changed. By becoming an object of discussion and by being allowed to unfold all by itself, the action of the characters was no longer framed as the manifestation of their will but

as the effect of a power that lay beyond them. Their words were no longer tools for achieving their ends but signs of a force they were unaware of. Returning to the *TNP*'s conception of the "people", the question thus becomes whether or not the same metamorphosis of action is applicable to those theatre pieces that purport to stage the "people" in their revolutionary or egalitarian essence. That Rancière immediately mentions *Danton's Death* suggests that it is. But what can the "people" be if action, including collective action, is no longer a capacity belonging to a self-present subject? Can the "people" ever be present to itself?

Rancière explores these questions by setting out from a famous text on the new theatre: Victor Hugo's 1833 preface to his play *Marie Tudor*. In this text, Hugo demanded that drama hitherto "mix on the stage all that is involved in life [...]: good, evil, the high and the low, fatality, providence, genius, chance, society, the world, nature, life".<sup>60</sup> Rancière picks up on the repetition of the term "life" in this extract. According to Hugo, the new theatre was not only meant to be the theatre of the "people", nor even of "humanity": it was to be the theatre of "life", "the universal Life that traverses and exceeds the lives of individuals" (LT 119). Rancière then argues that Hugo's preface, as important and exemplary as it is for modern theatre, nevertheless fails to confront the question of how this "universal Life" is meant to be effectively represented. For if "universal Life" is a power manifest in everything that exists – a kind of "fabric in which everything is interwoven to infinity" (LT 122) – then it can never be *present*. And it most certainly can never be present to the characters of the new theatre. Thus, when in *Danton's Death* Robespierre, having just debated with Danton the proper course of the Revolution, is unexpectedly struck by doubt, he asks himself: "Are we not sleepwalkers? Are not our actions dream actions, only more sharply defined, more complete?".<sup>61</sup> Placed in the mouth of the play's apparently most resolute actor, Robespierre's questions show that in the infinite milieu of "universal Life" the causal origins of one's acts can never be known. When one acts, one may as well be dreaming. While in the play Danton is opposed to Robespierre – Danton wonders when would be the most propitious time to act, and how, while Robespierre acts decisively, all the while accepting that the power that moves him remains obscure – both characters bear witness to the fact that there is no longer any certain link between thought (which is meant to be certain of its knowledge) and action (which is meant to originate in thought's calculations). This marks a definitive rupture with the two most dominant conceptions of the theatre since the Greeks: that of Plato, for whom the theatre was a lie, and that of Aristotle, for whom the theatre was a dignified intellectual construction where action followed a rational path (LT 119–

121). But how does modern theatre break with these two images of the theatrical thought? “Bluntly stated”, Rancière replies, in modern drama “the theatre of well-constructed actions, of speech that sums up thought and leads it to act [is] itself but a theatre of marionettes, giving a bodily device to abstract ideas. It is dramatic action as the plot of knowledge that is a lie” (LT 129). Aristotle thought he had saved the theatre from Plato’s condemnation, but in doing so he had promulgated an image of thought and action that betrayed the truth of “Life”.

So much for thought and action. But what of speech? Rancière’s answer to this question passes by way of an answer to another question: what sort of stories can modern theatre recount if the Aristotelean conception of narrative no longer holds? Rancière argues that modern theatre tends to stage singular “acts” that concentrate the power of the vast and impersonal network of forces that make the characters act despite themselves. Such “acts”, he explains, “open onto a new type of narration and interpretation: one that sees directly encapsulated in the singularity of the act the law of a whole that is no longer an organism whose members would have to be reconstituted, but instead a reticular system in which each moment in some way bears the power of the whole” (LT 126). As Rancière made clear in *Mute Speech*, in modern fiction we pass from a “representative” logic to an “expressive” one.<sup>62</sup> We also pass from a conception of the whole as a coherent set of relations between causes and effects, centre and periphery, to an “atmospheric” (LT 29) model of the whole, each of whose parts is capable of manifesting the whole’s power in equal measure (LT 22–23, 29, 54–55).<sup>63</sup>

Now, what goes for “acts” here, also goes for speech. Instead of being a means of exteriorising one’s will and modifying the world, the speech of modern theatre’s characters is tasked with “mak[ing] felt the content of a sensible milieu [and] enabl[ing] perception of the unsaid that haunts them” (LT 130). But it is also the silence between discrete moments of speech – or silence as the complete absence of speech – that transmits information regarding this imperceptible power. The great – and, in truth, impossible – task of modern theatre is thus to find ways of using speech, as well as the stage’s sensible environment, to make this absent power present. Rancière gives a perfect example of modern theatre carrying out this task in a short discussion of Maurice Maeterlinck’s 1895 play *Intérieur*. Here, Maeterlinck places a silent family behind a window through which two other characters, an old man and a stranger, look at them and comment on them. The family is unaware that that they are about to receive news that one of their daughters has died. The window here gives concrete form to the obliviousness of the modern subject faced with the

elusive but effective power of “Life” (LT 131–132): the family’s actions are all undertaken in utter ignorance of the truth.

In order to cope with this intangible power, modern theatre stages what Rancière calls a “split” or “double plot” (LT 132, 135): on the one hand, as in Aristotelean drama, modern theatre presents a series of actions structured by a “calculation of means and ends” (LT 133); but on the other hand it also interrupts this series with unpredictable events that manifest “true life”, or life in its truth as a “power [...] that overflows the framework of action” (LT 133). Rancière reprises here his analysis of Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* and concludes, following Maeterlinck’s article on the same play, that modern theatre constructs its “double plots” such that singular events can “tip the explicit plot over into its sleepwalking truth” (LT 135).<sup>64</sup> The example Rancière gives is the event of young Hilda’s gaze as it seen by the builder Solness, an event that makes Solness – who Rancière describes as a “master at cynically exploiting the talents and passions of others” (LT 133) – perform an act that runs counter to any conceivable calculation of means and ends: climbing to the top of the steeple of his newest building, from which he falls to his death on account of his acrophobia. Rancière argues that the challenge of a modern play like *The Master Builder* is to convey through the characters’ speech the power of Hilde’s gaze – a challenge that is ultimately impossible to meet: “words have never shown the power of a gaze” (LT 133).

In his conclusion to ‘The Theatre of Thoughts’ Rancière makes the close of *The Lost Thread* rhyme with its opening by advancing another critique of Barthes. This time it is Barthes’ Brecht-inspired analysis of the very same performance of *Richard II* that Rancière had seen in 1954 that attracts the philosopher’s critical fire. Before launching this critique Rancière first clarifies that besides the theatre of the “double plot” another form of theatre was born with the downfall of “representational poetics”: a theatre that also abandoned action as an intellectual construction, but which instead of making action the surface effect of an “invisible process” turned it into a “pure performance” (LT 137) with no other end than technical perfection. Rancière is thinking here of Meyerhold’s reconstructions of Ostrovsky’s *The Forest* or of Crommelynck’s *Le Cocu Magnifique*. In both cases, a story is transformed into a performance supposed to be sufficient in itself. Rancière traces the advent of this kind of theatre back to the very same moment Hugo wrote his preface to *Marie Tudor*, a moment where, in addition to Hugo’s attempts to stage the “people”, there appeared performances like those of Deburau at the *Théâtre des Funambules*.<sup>65</sup> Such instances of what would later come to be known as “art for art’s sake” did not



try to make the theatre a space that represented the essence of the “people”; they simply addressed the audience as an ensemble of people capable of taking pleasure in the performers’ technical proficiency. While Rancière shows how this second kind of theatre also emerges as a creative solution to the downfall of Aristotelean drama, he insists on its utter heterogeneity with respect to the theatre of the “double plot”: “Both ideas seem henceforth fated to gaze at each other through the window” (LT 138), like the characters from *Intérieur*.

To conclude ‘The Theatre of Thoughts’ Rancière mobilises the above description of modern theatre in order to challenge Barthes’ division of theatre into “the bourgeois theatre of identification and the proletarian theatre of estrangement” (LT 139), a division mobilised in his critique of the *TNPs* production of *Richard II*. While the first, “bourgeois” side of this division allegedly reflected back to the audience only what they already knew, the second, “proletarian” side, by means of the technique of “estrangement”, exposed the contingency of this knowledge and offered true insight into the conditions for political action. According to Barthes, the *TNPs* 1954 performance of *Richard II* was an example of “bourgeois” theatre since the main actor “embodied the role instead of showing it” (LT 139 – *Rancière’s emphasis*). He failed to place the role at a distance so as to allow the audience to critique it, as opposed to simply identifying with it. For Rancière, however, Barthes’ article is far from progressive. In fact, insofar as Barthes’ preferred theatre of “estrangement” sought to give the audience knowledge that would ground effective political action, it reproduced the key feature of Aristotelean drama: the identity between thought and action. Moreover, Rancière claims that Barthes failed to see that modern theatre “already bore its own effects of estrangement” (LT 140). The cause of these “effects” was the gap between the explicit plot and the obscure power that was moving it along unbeknownst to the characters. An actor could no longer simply “embody” a role and have the audience identify with it, since this body and role were subject to a force beyond them.

Readers hoping to extend or explore Rancière’s insights into modern theatre should read ‘The Theatre of Thoughts’ alongside his other recent essays on the theatre and on *mise-en-scène* collected in *Aisthesis*.<sup>66</sup> As is the case throughout *The Lost Thread*, Rancière’s readings of individual plays are short, even if they claim to capture the essence of their novelty. There is thus work to be done in producing more detailed readings of the same or other plays using Rancière’s concepts. Should readers do this, they might follow Rancière’s suggestion and study how individual

plays make “resonate in words a power other than that of their meaning, the power of life as the out-place that overflows the framework of action” (LT 133).

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction* (Bloomsbury, 2017). I will henceforth use the abbreviation *LT* to refer to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> The third chapter, ‘The Death of Prue Ramsay’, is shorter version of an article Rancière published in the journal *Novel*. See Jacques Rancière, ‘The Thread of the Novel’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 47 No. 2 (2014), pp.196–209. In fact, the entire first section of *The Lost Thread*, ‘The Lost Thread of the Novel’, is an expanded version of this article.

<sup>3</sup> See Jacques Rancière, ‘The Politics of the Spider’, trans. Emily Rohrbach and Emily Sun, *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Summer 2011), pp.239–250.

<sup>4</sup> See Jacques Rancière, ‘The Infinite Taste of the Republic’, trans. Elissa Marder and Gina Stamm, *Yale French Studies*, No. 125–126 (2014), ‘Time for Baudelaire (Poetry, Theory, History)’, pp.30–44.

<sup>5</sup> See David F. Bell, ‘*Le fil perdu*. The Music of the Indistinct’, in Patrick M. Bray (ed.) *Understanding Rancière, Understanding Modernism* (Bloomsbury 2017), pp.111–124.

<sup>6</sup> Oliver Davis (ed.), *Rancière Now: Current Perspectives on Jacques Rancière* (Wiley, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Grace Hellyer, Julian Murphet (eds.), *Rancière and Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> In addition to *Understanding Rancière, Understanding Modernism*, see also Paul Bowman, Richard Stamp (eds.), *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus* (Bloomsbury, 2011), Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross (eds.), *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality* (Bloomsbury, 2012), Jean-Philippe Deranty (ed.), *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts* (Routledge, 2014), Oliver Davis, *Jacques Rancière* (Polity, 2011) and Joseph J. Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury, 2011).

<sup>9</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History*, trans Hassan Melehy (University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p.100.

<sup>10</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford World’s Classics, 2015), p.26.

<sup>11</sup> See Jacques Rancière, ‘The Thread of the Novel’, p.196.

<sup>12</sup> For the most compact account of this “regime”, along with the two other “regimes” that bookend it – the “ethical regime of images” and the “aesthetic regime of art” – see Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Bloomsbury, 2013). See also the first chapter of Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, ‘From Representation to Express’, where Rancière does not use this terminology but nevertheless details the dialectic that leads from the “representative” to the “aesthetic regime of art”, and does so with close reference to literature: Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, trans. James Swenson (Columbia University Press, 2011), pp.41–50.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p.42, p.125, p.190.

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose (Polity, 2011), p.8, p.38, p.39, p.53.

<sup>15</sup> Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly, ‘Gustave Flaubert’, *Les œuvres et les hommes, XVIII: Le Roman Contemporain* (Geneva Slatkin Reprints, 1968), pp.91-135

<sup>16</sup> ‘From Captain Conrad’s *Lord Jim*’, *The Queen, The Lady’s Newspaper*, 3 November, 1900, p.704, published in Allan H. Simmons (ed.), *Joseph Conrad: Contemporary Reviews. Volume One* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.293.

<sup>17</sup> ‘From Captain Conrad’s *Lord Jim*’, p.293.

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- <sup>18</sup> 'Gustave Flaubert', p.103.
- <sup>19</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, pp.46-47.
- <sup>20</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p.48.
- <sup>21</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p.41, p.125, *The Politics of Literature*, pp.7-8.
- <sup>22</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Winter, 2008), pp.233–248.
- <sup>23</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (University of California Press, 1989).
- <sup>24</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Three Tales* (London: Penguin, 2005), p.3.
- <sup>25</sup> See Jacques Rancière, 'Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed', pp.234-235.
- <sup>26</sup> See Jacques Rancière, 'Balzac and the Island of the Book', *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing* (Stanford University Press, 2011), pp.94-112 and Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, pp.93-100.
- <sup>27</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p.41; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, p.8.
- <sup>28</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p.48.
- <sup>29</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed', pp.242-244.
- <sup>30</sup> Cited in *LT* p.xxviii.
- <sup>31</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Penguin, 2007), p.6.
- <sup>32</sup> Cited in *LT* p.34.
- <sup>33</sup> See Rancière's brilliant summary of this scene in *LT* pp.37-38.
- <sup>34</sup> "In retrospect, I would say that it was an attempt to take social matters away from the representational plot, the representational connection of causes and effects and to recast it as an 'aesthetic' plot, a matter of variation of perceptions, intensities and speeds, just as novelists, from Flaubert to Virginia Woolf, did it for life and love stories", Jacques Rancière, 'From Politics to Aesthetics?', *Paragraph*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2008), p.14. See also Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia, 'Dissenting Words: A Conversation with Jacques Rancière', *Diacritics*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Summer 2000), p.121.
- <sup>35</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed', pp.247–248. See also Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, pp.70–71.
- <sup>36</sup> Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (London, 1992), p.3.
- <sup>37</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'Why Emma Bovary Had to be Killed', p.241.
- <sup>38</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p.124.
- <sup>39</sup> See Jacques Rancière, 'From Wordsworth To Mandelstam: The Transports of Liberty', *The Flesh of Words: The Politics of Writing*, trans. Charlotte Mandel (Stanford University Press, 2004), pp.9-40.
- <sup>40</sup> John Keats, *To Autumn*, in *John Keats: The Complete Poems* (Penguin, 1988), p.434.
- <sup>41</sup> For a classic expression of this view, see Geoffrey Hartman's essay 'Poem and Ideology: A Study of Keats' "To Autumn"', in *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (University of Chicago Press, 1975). In his article 'Keats' Commonwealth', which Rancière engages with at the opening of 'Spider's Work', Nicholas Roe claims that Hartmann's essay echoes the views of Jerome McGann, for whom "the whole point" of Keats' poetry "was not to enlist poetry in the service of social and political causes — which is what Byron and Shelley were doing — but to dissolve social and political conflicts in the mediations of art and beauty". See Jerome McGann, 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism', *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 94 (1979).

- <sup>42</sup> This is Roe's alternative reading to Hartmann's and McGann's. In 'Keats' Commonwealth', Roe claims that in composing *To Autumn* Keats demonstrated his solidarity with the slain of the Peterloo Massacre and with the reformist cause by referring implicitly to the goddess Ceres, a figure who incarnates the reformists' values: "Ceres presides over land originally 'common to all men'; over food farming, cultivation, and prosperity; and over the laws determining 'rights and properties' among contentious humankind. She represents nature's abundance, and also the rights and laws that determine a just distribution of that plenty", 'Keats' Commonwealth', p.208.
- <sup>43</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Excursion* (Edward Moxon, 1847), p.315.
- <sup>44</sup> John Keats, *Selected Letters* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p.141.
- <sup>45</sup> For Rancière's best discussion of the transformation the categories of activity and passivity undergo in the "aesthetic regime", see Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes', *New Left Review*, Vol. 14 (March–April, 2002), p.136, p.141.
- <sup>46</sup> John Keats, *Selected Letters*, p.63.
- <sup>47</sup> See Jacques Rancière, 'The Archaeomodern Turn', in Michael P. Steinberg (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), p.24–41.
- <sup>48</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'The Archaeomodern Turn', p.35 n. 12.
- <sup>49</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'The Archaeomodern Turn', p.37.
- <sup>50</sup> Alison Ross, 'The Meaning in the Detail: Literature and the Detritus of the Nineteenth Century in Jacques Rancière and Walter Benjamin', in Grace Hellyer, Julian Murphet, *Rancière and Literature* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p.185.
- <sup>51</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'The Politics of Literature', *Substance*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 'Issue 103: Contemporary Thinker Jacques Rancière' (2004), p.21.
- <sup>52</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p.68; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, p.21.
- <sup>53</sup> A similar argument is made by Alison Ross, 'The Meaning in the Detail', p.185.
- <sup>54</sup> For a discussion of the similarities and differences between Rancière and Benjamin in terms of their attitudes to the social and historical sciences, see Alison Ross, 'The Meaning in the Detail', pp.183-204.
- <sup>55</sup> Jacques Rancière, 'The Politics of Literature', p.21.
- <sup>56</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire*, trans. Martin Turnell (A New Directions Paperbook, 1967), p.190.
- <sup>57</sup> See, for the same point, Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p.48.
- <sup>58</sup> For Rancière's definitive statement on the history of the "People's Theatre", see Jacques Rancière, 'The People's Theatre: A Long Drawn-Out Affair', in *The Intellectual and His People: Volume 2* (Verso, 2012), pp.1-40.
- <sup>59</sup> For this circuit of reciprocity, see *LT* p.121.
- <sup>60</sup> See also Rancière's discussion of this text in Jacques Rancière, 'Plebeian Heaven (Paris, 1830)', *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (Verso, 2013), pp.50-51.
- <sup>61</sup> Georg Büchner, *Danton's Death, Leonce and Lena, Woyzeck*, trans. Victor Price (Oxford University Press, 1971), p.24.
- <sup>62</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p.63.
- <sup>63</sup> See also Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, p.37.
- <sup>64</sup> See Jacques Rancière, 'The Immobile Theatre (Paris, 1894–95)', in *Aisthesis*, pp.111-120. See also Jacques Rancière, 'The Temple Staircase (Moscow–Dresden, 1912)', in *Aisthesis*, pp.171–190.
- <sup>65</sup> See Jacques Rancière, 'The Gymnasts of the Impossible (Paris, 1879)', in *Aisthesis*, pp.80–85.

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<sup>66</sup> These are 'The Gymnasts of the Impossible', 'The Immobile Theatre' and 'The Temple Staircase', all cited above.

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