

## ***Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics***

Jacques Rancière (translated by James Swenson)

New York City: Columbia University Press, 2011, pp. 208, \$29.00 paperback

ISBN: 978-0231151030

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Have you ever started to watch a television show like *Lost* or *Homeland* or *Boardwalk Empire* after it has been on for over a year or so? How frustrating is it to sit there and not know what is going on? You don't know any of the characters; you don't know any of the settings; you don't know any of the conflicts; you don't have any frame of reference. Sure, you have the time and drive to get through the rest of the season, and you may be interested in watching the show until it is cancelled. But unless you rent it from NetFlix, buy the DVD, or have On Demand capabilities that show the first season-and-a-half, you may never have a full understanding of what you are viewing. That is how I felt reading *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics* by Jacques Rancière, translated by James Swenson and introduced by Gabriel Rockhill. Rancière, using such political/ideological/social/cultural critics as Althusser and Foucault as a foundation, has a three-fold agenda: 1) he places realism and naturalism "firmly at the center of the silent revolution of the expressive regime"; 2) he uses the works of Hugo, Balzac, and Zola as examples of the "expression of society," as opposed to writings that separate society; and 3) he believes that "literature favored the emergence of the historical, sociological, and political sciences" because literature itself is a form of "social expression."<sup>1</sup> How does he do all of this? That question is not an easy one to answer.

First, one must define the terms presented to us in Rancière's title; these definitions are found in Rockhill's glossary of terms in his translation of Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics*, and in various other resources concerning Rancière. Rockhill states that 'silent speech' (which equates to 'mute speech') is a component of the 'aesthetic regime of art' (which is one of three regimes, the other two being the 'ethical regime of images' and 'the representative regime of art').<sup>2</sup> As Sophie Berrebi adds:

In the ethical regime, exemplified by Plato's republic, a sculpture is gauged against the question of truthfulness and copy. In the representational regime the sculpture

<sup>1</sup> Gabriel Rockwell's "Introduction" for *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Rockhill's "Glossary of Technical Terms," for *The Politics of Aesthetics*, New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006, p. 91-92.

will be considered within the system of the hierarchy of genres and in relation to qualities such as skill and adequacy between subject matter and representation. In the representational regime the arts occupy a particular place in what Rancière has elsewhere called the ‘distribution of the sensible’, a notion that can be understood as the division of activities in a society. The aesthetic regime differs from the other two in that it no longer assigns to art a particular place in society, nor is art any longer defined by skill and practice: for this reason, the term art in the singular replaces the pluralized form of the (fine) arts.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the aesthetic regime “rejects the distribution of the sensible” and “is constantly caught in a tension between being specifically art and merging with other forms of activity and being,”<sup>4</sup> which, then leads to a fundamental contradiction: all things end up having meaning and a voice, while, at the same time, they are unable to use that voice and will forever be silent (unless someone gives us a better understanding of what that meaning is).<sup>5</sup>

It is here that literature gets defined and *Mute Speech* becomes a bit clearer. According to Rancière, in an interview with Solange Guenoun and James H. Kavanagh, literature is “an established system of the art of writing, which became consolidated in the nineteenth century.”<sup>6</sup> This system of writing goes against Rancière’s Belles Lettres system, which is part of the representational regime of art, an art that had conformed to set rules and regulations. This equates to fiction/genre and is one of the foci of *Mute Speech*’s first chapter, “From Representation to Expression.” Rancière believes that there are four principles to representation: the telling of the story, the conforming to the genre, decorum and verisimilitude (simply put, the relationship between the author and the reader), and presence (the performance). The argument stemming from this assessment is that with the change from representation to the expression/aesthetic (from the “intellectual power of ideas” to “the material power of words”) came “the ruin of the generic principle.”<sup>7</sup> He continues by stating that style “is no longer what it was up to that point: the choice of modes of expression appropriate to the different characters in a given situation and of ornaments proper to the genre. Style now becomes the very principle of art.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Sophie Berrebi, “Jacques Rancière: Aesthetics is Politics,” *Art and Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Summer 2008, available at: [www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/berrebirev.html](http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n1/berrebirev.html).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Rockwell’s “Introduction” for *Mute Speech*, p. 91-92.

<sup>6</sup> Solange Guénoun and James H. Kavanagh, interview, “Jacques Rancière: Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement,” *Substance: A Review of Theory & Literary Criticism*, Vol. 29, Iss. 2, 2000, p.7.

<sup>7</sup> Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

Hugo falls into this category, as explained in Rancière's second chapter, "From the Book of Stone to the Book of Life," and as explained *better* in his interview with Guenon and Kavanagh: for Hugo, the Belle Lettres paradigms were "summarized in the systemization given by eighteenth-century French theoreticians, as a culmination of the system originating in Aristotle's Poetics."<sup>9</sup> One element of *Mute Speech* that needs to be addressed is that Rancière thinks that it was not fully the authors or the artists that destroyed the representation of the art regime, but "literary critics" that did the most damage. Rancière, in the same interview, goes on to say that he is not really delving into literary theory when he produces text. Rather, he is more interested in "the distribution of words, time, space."<sup>10</sup> He believes that, "Literature and investigations into literature belong to everyone."<sup>11</sup> This point gets established in Chapter Three, "The Book of Life and the Expression of Society," when Rancière simply says, "A people make a poem, a poem makes a people."<sup>12</sup>

*Mute Speech*, therefore, is partially a condemnation of critical theory and critical theorists. As Hal Foster writes, since the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a shift from profound respect for this form of criticism to it now being somewhat of a "straight-jacket" for writers.<sup>13</sup> Foster continues by saying it is believed that "critique is driven by a power of will to power, and it is not reflexive about its own claims to truth."<sup>14</sup> I suppose this is where my issue lies with Rancière; he is a teacher and a philosopher who can easily say that critical theorists silence the freedoms of literature, and yet he seemingly asserts his power as a critical theorist. For example, in his fourth chapter, "From Generalized Poetics to the Mute Letter," Rancière writes:

The epic world is poetic—anti-prosaic—because it is the exact adequation between a collective *ethos* and individual characters. The individuality of the Homeric book of the people is in the image of this unity. Homer writes his poem as Atreus sculpted his scepter and Odysseus his matrimonial bed. That is why this poem can be simultaneously a book of life, sculpted from the tissue of collective life, and the necessarily individual work of a unique artist.<sup>15</sup>

To me, this is very much a "straight-jacket" or constraining, not only in content but in language. Rancière becomes a part of the democracy he criticizes, a term that means "less a state of being than an act of contention that implements various forms of dissensus."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Guénoun and Kavanagh, "Jacques Rancière," p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p. 69.

<sup>13</sup> Hal Foster, "Post-Critical," *October*, Issue 139, Winter 2012, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p. 80-81.

<sup>16</sup> Gabriel Rockhill's "Glossary of Technical Terms," for *The Politics of Aesthetics*, p. 84.

He becomes one of the police and part of the political system he is somewhat against, a system that is “characterized in terms of division, conflict and polemic.”<sup>17</sup>

Admittedly, I used a great deal of sources to help me with *Mute Speech*, and, I am quite sure that I have not even begun to scratch the surface of what is both a complex and cerebral text. The work, in fact, goes on for several chapters (“From the Poetry of the Future to the Poetry of the Past,” “The Fable of the Letter,” and “The Writing of the Idea,” to name just a few), where Rancière attempts to prove (among other claims):

The novel no longer merely sets the necessity of writing in opposition to the indifference of a subject. It sets two visions of writing in opposition to another. In one, writing is the Word that bears witness to the power of incarnation present in poetry, the people, and stone; in the other, writing is a letter without a body that could vouch for its truth and is thus available for any use and any speaker. Behind the opposition between the two master principles that split Romantic aesthetics is a conflict between two writings that turns out to be the hidden truth of the new literature.<sup>18</sup>

Again, the language that Rancière uses, on top of creating of his own definitions of terms and his analysis of text, is contradictory to his overall ideological/philosophical/social beliefs. My thoughts on Rancière’s work, though, may be somewhat “political.” I, more than likely, am considered an officer of the police state that Rancière detests; a member of the democracy that has so terribly silenced the freedom of speech and literature because of my own politically-skewed perceptions of what literature is. At the same time, I am not any different than people *not* involved in critical theory, those who are outside of the critical theoretical circle that casually read to be entertained or appeased. As Rancière claims in his conclusion, “A Skeptical Art,” like with all writing, his prose,

...is itself riven between two poles: on the one hand, the book of the symbols of the poeticity of the world, of the spiritual life or the sensuous inner world; on the other, naked writing, the mute and loquacious speech that rolls around left and right, dependent upon the wavering attention unqualified readers pay to the printed page, at the mercy of what that attention draws from the page and the chain of words and images in which it is translated.<sup>19</sup>

Unfortunately, I may be one of these “unqualified readers” Rancière writes about in *Mute Speech*. It is my firm belief, however, that even “unqualified readers” with “wavering attention[s]” have a distinct right to at least try to provide a voice to those works they are reading. Even if one is part of the democracy or the political system, one should be allowed

<sup>17</sup> Jeremy Valentine, “Rancière and Contemporary Political Problems,” *Paragraph*, Vol. 28, Iss. 1, March 2005, p. 46.

<sup>18</sup> Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p. 87.

<sup>19</sup> Rancière, *Mute Speech*, p. 171-172.

to interpret a text as one wishes, without being judged by those who claim to be on the outskirts of that system.

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