

Was the ignorant schoolmaster a rhetor? Appointments from *Langue Maternelle*, by Joseph Jacotot.

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to show the influence of rhetorical thought in the work of Joseph Jacotot, the teacher-character of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: five lessons in intellectual emancipation*, by Jacques Rancière. If the book of this French philosopher achieved, in Brazil and worldwide, a success capable of spreading the theory of intellectual emancipation and, in so doing, capable of questioning some of the strongest presuppositions of pedagogical discourse, specially about the need of explanation, that interests me to think how rhetoric can serve as a key for this critics, explicitly assumed as philosophical. The question I would like to discuss is why the rhetorical tradition, formally expressed in the words of *Langue maternelle* by Jacotot, addressed to teacher's education and basis, therefore, for their practice and 'radicals' interrogations, is always left alone, on the shores, when philosophy appropriates itself of that discourse. It seems to me that this is a constant strategy when these two types of discourses face each other since its Greek beginnings with Plato. Then, more than shaming an author or the other I think the most important issue is to discuss this relationship of appropriation and silencing. Particularly in this paper to discuss it starting from Jacotot's voice manifestation. Without the appropriation of philosophy does the 'critical' powerfulness of rhetoric disappear? Is philosophy the best rhetorical interpreter of rhetoric itself, that is, the best way to put its word in movement? Jacotot without Rancière is forceless to the thinking and to the reflection processes? Jacotot without Rancière would remain a mute experience in educational tradition? Is this a possible explanation for this silencing of rhetoric: its influence in the philosophical-scientific occidental winner tradition can just be accepted, legitimated, through the voice of some philosopher? Is that with Plato, in *Phaedrum*? Or with Rancière, in *The ignorant schoolmaster*? What are the risks of the rhetors' voice? Of listening to them? Seduction, mistake, illusion? Has Jacotot seduced his pupils? Has HE mislead them, eluded them? Do not all discourses reveal a seductive, illusionary, aspect of itself, even the most logical and metaphysical ones? Obviously it's not our intention here, in this presentation, to come to a conclusion in all this range of questions, but just only to raise them, to show how Jacotot describe the rhetorical aspects of his own educational position. The intention is to repeat Jacotot, as he does himself with Fenelon, not to explain him. To describe that in his *Langue Maternelle* the majority of its chapters (eight of fifteen, at least) are explicitly devoted to rhetoric: Of the improvisation, Differences on the three genres, Of the pulpit's eloquence, Of the tribune's orator, Assemblies that exercise material power, Assemblies that exercise a moral power, Assemblies that are supposed to exercise a part in power and Of advocacies' eloquence. The other seven, devoted to disciplines (Reading and writing, language study, grammar, history, geography and arithmetic and its correspondent exercises), is controversial if what grounds them are nothing but rhetoric. Why, then, a so profound silence of those "data"? Are they irrelevant? Is it precise a simple mention that says: "Jacotot teaches rhetoric"? In fact, such ground of pedagogical discourse in rhetorical tradition was not uncommon to that period. Then, perhaps this traditional resource was not relevant to think the phenomenon of Jacotot's experience. Or perhaps it was. Why, then, Jacotot itself, after the experience in Louvain (the book is written forward) continues to use a rhetorical vocabulary? Didn't he notice his own new achievements? Didn't he know how to use a philosophical vocabulary? Or did he prefer not to? Is there a clear line separating Jacotot's thoughts about rhetoric from his thoughts about philosophy? These are some of the questions I would like to raise today from this text, *Langue Maternelle*. Not to answer them in a definitive form, like a conclusive explanation. But just only raise them to thinking, to place them in movement, making them powerful to all the ones who are interested in Rancière-Jacotot's thinking, to all the ones to whom the impact of *The ignorant schoolmaster*'s reception cannot be explained only by logical-metaphysical terms.

To begin this paper it's worthy to follow a little bit the path of Joseph Jacotot, his indications. Mislearn, even if it's only for a short moment, the Jacotot we know, the Jacotot-character, made object by the writings of Jacques Rancière. Let us talk the Jacotot-author, subject, not "object" of knowledge. Further, perhaps, we'll find the same Jacotot that Rancière has seen. Either similar or, perhaps, different.

To those whom this may sound strange, I suggest an exercise, a game, an exercise which Jacotot himself indicates in many passages of his book: "start by learning an author, repeat him without stopping, relate him with all your other readings, verify the observation of the grammarians and rhetors, but finish with this observations" (JACOTOT, J. 2004, p. 93).

So, let us listen- to what Jacotot says about himself:

"Aristotle was, then, right when he used to say that rhetoric teaches what one has to do to persuade. Long ago it was proposed to him the same objection people do to me: 'In your system rhetoric is a double-edged weapon'. Aristotle answers me: That's right. Rhetoric, as everything else, has its advantages and its drawbacks: only one thing has no drawback, its virtue. I complement that rhetoric is the art of persuading and that persuading is to please and to commove. You please someone by habits [ethos]; you commove someone exciting the passions [pathos]. What else is lacking to demonstrate that rhetoric and reason has nothing in common? If we were rational, there wouldn't exist rhetoric: truth wouldn't need it to please us; mistake would in vain slide down between the fingers, it wouldn't seduce us. Is there to renounce therefore rhetoric? The same worth asking if we can stop being humans" (ibid, p. 49)

Jacotot then assumes rhetoric. It is not possible for a man to live without it. Let us repeat with him, as he does with Fenelon, author of *Telemachus*: "If we were rational..." The conditional indicates that this French teacher does not believe that we are. In this sense we need to accept rhetoric, as we need to accept the fact we are humans, in such ways we show ourselves up, with our habits and passions. Rhetoric exists, although all attempts, since Plato and its also character-author Socrates, of eliminating it, or worse, of transforming it in what it never has been: philosophy. For this reason Jacotot insists, not only in the passage quoted above, that rhetoric and reason has nothing in common. He is conscious of the antique debate: "When I admit that rhetoric and reason have nothing in common, people oppose me with sentences Socrates used to say to Gorgias. I knew Gorgias and Socrates; I knew also Aristotle, and I decided to follow Aristotle's opinion, which is the same as mine" (ibid., p. 38-39).

In case the Greek context is not very fresh in mind it's worth remembering Plato and relating, as indicates the ignorant schoolmaster, this reading with his dialogue *Gorgias*. In this book Plato tries to prove that if there is something we can call rhetoric it's necessary for it to know the object of its discourse, its reason, which would make it common to reason.

"Socrates: I supposed at the time when you were saying this that rhetoric could never be an unjust thing, since the speeches it made were always about justice but when a little later you told us that the orator might make even an unjust use of his rhetoric, that indeed surprised me, and thinking the two statements were not in accord I made those proposals, - that if, like myself, you counted it a gain to be refuted, it was worthwhile to have the discussion, but if not, we had better have done it. And now that we have come to examine the matter, you see for yourself that we agree once more that it is impossible for the rhetorician

to use his rhetoric unjustly or consent to do wrong. Now, to distinguish properly which way the truth of the matter lies will require, by the Dog, Gorgias, no short sitting” (460e – 461b)

Jacotot, as we see, decides to follow Aristotle’s solution. We cannot avoid the danger of double-edged rhetoric on behalf of rationality, on behalf of a logical-metaphysical demand which connects the reality of a thing in our world in somehow dependency of its non-contradiction with its own idea. Let us remember the realistic Aristotle when he uses in the beginning of its *Rhetoric* an ethical perspective to refute Socrates-Gorgias controversy.

“Rhetoric is useful because things that are true and things that are just have a natural tendency to prevail over their opposites, so if the decisions of judge are not what they ought to be, the defeat must be due to the speakers themselves, and they must be blamed accordingly” (1355a 21-24)

It’s not enough for Aristotle, as it will be for Jacotot, to remain with the “absolute truth” of pointing out to the lacks of “reality” of rhetorical discourse from an outsider position as if with that rhetoric itself would somehow disappear, or at least, lose consistency, lose “reality”. Aristotelian perspective assumes, as we see, that this platonic purity is worthy of censure. Truth and justice lose, and with them we lose as well, if we disregard rhetoric, by leaving this weapon, already existing, on some other’s hands. It’s better, then, learning this art, and learning it deeply. Rhetoric is, therefore, an art, as well as others, and with the acceptance of arts, in plural, the acceptance of men, with their costumes and passions, of physical world in which a word is thrown and can provoke a body, is ever since assumed. Jacotot simply follows this resolution.

Assuming rhetoric as an art he can state that a discourse “always consists in facts on which someone reflects” (JACOTOT, J. 2004, p. 60). What is modified in each discourse is the way these facts are displayed to reflection. He insists: “Either by inspiration, that is, by memory, either the object is real and immediately presented to your eyes, nobody speaks, writes or composes in any other way” (ibid., p. 101). A strong statement, therefore. Jacotot encapsulates all discursive possibilities in a rhetorical universe. Either the fact is distant of the speaker or writer, and then memory is present, or the fact is present, which would require not only mnemonic devices, but also improvisation.

All this language may seem a little uncommon to us that were educated by the followers of Enlightenment and Romanticism. We have learnt to distrust memory. Learning by heart was always considered somehow “non-progressive”, “old-fashioned”. But this language was not unfamiliar to the rhetor Jacotot, a lecturer and teacher of rhetoric. These considerations about time when composing discourses were not much different from what Aristotle says about the properness of each discursive genres: deliberative, for the future; judiciary, for the past and epideictic for the present (1358b). That’s why Jacotot related discourse to its temporal presentation to reflection.

If we take a look to his book *Langue Maternelle* we’ll see one chapter dedicated to “Difference of three genres”, in which Jacotot only speaks of the epideictic discourse, the one he’s interested most for educational reasons. He ignores the other two to

indicate modes of composing encomiums and censures from his experiences with students in Belgium. And turning out what Rancière will recover from him Jacotot points out that intelligence is which makes us capable of composing different discourses in different genres. And he goes further by posing that intelligence is not a result of mind's faculties, in plural, but is an equal and world spread property present in all heads.

"The common faculty of all humans consists of perceiving relations; this talent is found in all heads. The faculty to learn to communicate these combinations of intelligence by signs were given to everybody. To appreciate the effect of such development, according to the place assigned to each thought, to each emotion is, nevertheless, the same faculty." (ibid. p. 203)

What is important, then, in the epideictic genre, either in encomiums or censures is to commove this faculty, to excite the passions which produce in us some effect. That's what makes encomiums or censures something that can be retained, that can be, in Jacotot's point of view, learned. The good rhetor, known here as the good book, the good thing that can be related to all other things ("Everything is in everything"), is the one who surprises us, who provokes something unexpected, the one who presents us with the most fundamental "aesthetic" contradiction: "... telling us something new, even though there is in it nothing new" (ibid. p. 202). That's the rhetorical sense of "place" ("*topos*"). As quoted above: "place assigned to each thought, to each emotion". Remembering Aristotle again, all discourses are composed of syllogisms and examples and the *topoi* are what build syllogisms up (1358a).

What interests us here is to point out that this philosophical analysis made Jacotot think that the faculty capable of appreciating these places of discourse is the same capable of composing them. Jacotot tells us: we compose discourses, texts, speeches, experiences from what we already know, common-places and particular-places, according to the genre and the intention of the discourse. What reaches our soul is not a mark of inspiration, an inspiration of a privileged being, of someone above the mortals, to whom it was allowed certain kinds of rare endowment and aptitudes. That blocks also the idea we could ascend to that place if we were intelligent enough, sensible enough, the idea in which our meritocratic societies are based on. The meritocracy itself is under suspicion by Jacotot's idea of equal intelligences. What reaches our soul, therefore, is the possibility of being capable to appreciate the same as any other human is capable of, to feel as anybody what is and is not new. The places are known, the words, the symbols are known, even the screenplays are known (heroes and villains, for example); what reaches our soul is the compositions' surprise, its arrangement. And this is not the result of an inspired being, a genius, the result of an *ex nihil* creation, fruit of invention. It's the result of repetition, of imitation. Jacotot quotes Racine and his repetitive work of imitating Euripides (2004). His tragedies were not the ones of the Greek poet, they are *like* the ones of him. We imitate the model, not the content, we would say. This is the surprise, this is the "new" aspect. This is also what allows us to learn. If the knowledge's object was totally unfamiliar to us, if we had lost the reference, the sign would sound mute and there wouldn't be any communication. It's because we have the same intelligence as any other, including the

genius or the elected ones, that we are allowed to commove ourselves constantly with one's production of sense and, in so doing, relate ourselves with him/her, making significant to each one of us, in a word: learning.

What grounds, therefore, Jacotot's novelty for the philosophy of education, from Rancière's writing, that is, the idea of the equality of intelligences, is a rhetorical idea. It's to the democratic rhetors that we should credit the idea that we all are capable of learning and produce everything that another human being is able of. It's not to philosophy, marked with a Platonism since its origin, somehow aristocratic therefore, to whom we should credit the "hypothesis" of equal intelligences. From the beginnings of metaphysics till its "end", with Romanticism's development, we still remain hostages of the idea that some are more intelligent than others and to them should be given the primacy of teaching, of speaking, and continuing the line, of commanding, of governing. To the others, "less" intelligent, including the less intelligent discourses, like the rhetorical, it should be given the only right to listen, to be in silence, to be under tutelage. Like also all teacher-student relation's tradition.

But why then, even after Romanticism, even in post-nietzschean philosophy of Jacques Rancière, for example, does it continue an omission for the fact that rhetoric is what grounds a "contemporary" thinking like Jacotot's? Why the maximum reference to Jacotot's rhetoric in "The ignorant schoolmaster" is to sign that he's a teacher of rhetoric, as he was of many other disciplines in his career? Is it enough to consider this discussion of Jacotot and rhetorical tradition an accessory element of his thinking, result of usual characteristics of his time? Here it's not the case of composing a judiciary piece of Rancière, of his omission despite the "facts". It's not the case of judging Rancière, even because, following a rhetorical tradition, it should be given to him the right to defend himself and only then each "judge" here could evaluate the debate. Here the case is only to raise light to this detail of the relation between philosophy and rhetoric, to question this quite continuous silence of rhetorical "contents". Not much to judge Rancière's philosophy or Plato's, or philosophy itself. To raise light through some rhetorical elements does not mean, as some accuse, to praise rhetoric over philosophy. As the opposite seems also too restrictive. By questioning this relation this paper does not aim to underestimate philosophy's role and make an unrestricted encomium of rhetoric. It is a double-edged weapon, let us repeat Jacotot. And remind us that this idea is taken from a thinker that has been always considered a philosopher: Aristotle. By questioning, therefore, the relation between rhetoric and philosophy this paper aims only to show how this relationship is much more complex than its constant silences try to stress, even for educational purposes. Aristotle himself perhaps could be a good example of this complexity. Considering the silence mode of this relationship, how can we call rhetorical teachings the content which comes from a "philosopher"? And why not?

I would not have here, obviously, the intention of coming to an answer for the possibilities and potentialities of this debate, which has begun twenty-five centuries ago. What I intend is only to show that reading Jacotot by himself, from *Langue Maternelle*,

should be faced as a series of rhetorical elements and of discussions for and against this tradition that has to be made explicit, spoken, taken out of the mutism they are. Even to show that by assuming a rhetorical position one is not compromised to assume all rhetoric. Like Jacotot shows by making the critics he considered fair to rhetorical tradition. There are different rhetorics. Philosophical tradition is the one who has intended to put them all together under the same label - to -, then, in the moment of its critic be more emphatic in its clash of silencing. It's Socrates who tries, in Gorgias (460d), to make rhetors responsible for all uses of their art, as if teachers were totally responsible for the uses of their pupils, to what Gorgias argues that a wrestling-teacher cannot be responsible for the aptitudes of his pupils. Rhetoric is instrument, it is weapon. Jacotot is very conscious of that, so that he makes critics to what he considered "simple rhetoric", critics that were already pointed out at him by the specialists of his time:

*Journal of Paris* will say: 'It's not like that we produce a Bossuet, a Massillon, a Homer, a Virgil. All this dry and arid dissections have never produced a man of genius'. Do not listen to this rhetoric: try to make your student learn a book of the genre it's destined to, and to which it's related all the other from the same genre; try to make him/her know the ensemble, the work's details he is studying; that if it was lost he could remake it, and you will see." (2004, p. 87)

Or, faced to the enlightened motivation of educating everybody, of collective emancipation: "You are not compromised of the education of human genre. Pay attention to the fact that this is nothing but rhetoric: your conscious will remind you the precept is good, even if the sequence was not well composed." (ibid., p. 85)

Jacotot, therefore, does not present himself as an unrestricted apologizer of rhetoric against philosophy. Silencing philosophy through rhetoric would leave us with the same problems. It's interesting to notice, though, that when the French teacher accuses another discourse he accuses it of being rhetorical. How can we understand him, then? Would this apparent contradiction make him become a liar, a trickster? It's curious to see people accusing Jacotot, in 19<sup>th</sup> century, with similar words of which were accused sophists in Greece: charlatans, discourse's charlatans. "If you accuse me of charlatanism: that's not fair. Say to me I'm too obscure that it's impossible to comprehend me. By this way you would be accusing only my talent, not my intentions" (ibid., p. 62).

If Jacotot sometimes criticizes discourses as simple rhetoric and other times he exalts them for being rhetorical this is not a reason to put him in this logical jail of contradiction that philosophy since Socrates constructed. It can be, as Jacotot claims, only a mistake on discourse's composition, a lack of talent, not a lack of character, as intended Plato, for example. Jacotot tries to pass by, to pass aside, this logical imbroglio of the relationship between rhetoric and philosophy. In an unfamiliar way, but motivated by his educational-political intentions, he assumes his charlatanism, assumes his rhetoric, the rhetoric philosophy conceived: "As this lesson is important, let us continue our charlatanism" (ibid., p. 62). It matters few what others say, it matters what Louvain's experience, in Belgium, has shown him. It's not, though, the unique time

Jacotot assumes himself a rhetor in *Langue Maternelle*. By asking others to consider his method with the same respect as any other he says: "Look that I also do my little rhetoric" (ibid., p. 131). For the rhetor Jacotot, therefore, obscure if you want, partisan of discursive charlatanisms, word and teaching "magician", such as a Gorgias, it's worth thinking that the opposition between rhetoric and reason, which he says to have nothing in common, does not mean an investment in irrationality. It's to think reason from the bottom. Not from an upside-down direction, from above all discourses, above all men, as the enlighteners would dream of, and as Plato would too. Gorgias used to say "the one who deceives is wiser because he let himself to be deceived and the one who eludes is fairer because he doesn't offer anything he cannot fulfill." (frag. 23, Diels-Kranz). Jacotot used to say: "The reason which is not commoved does not see more than a fool in Orosmano [character of tragedy Zaire, by Voltaire] or in Misanthrope [comedy of Molière] (ibid., p. 95). Reason needs to be commoved, truth needs rhetoric. We live today with a kind of fear of commotion, of passivity, and, in this way, we see little. Commove is nothing but move-with. Why then so much fear? Fear of being moved with? Of being moved away? Of being hirst? Of being hurled, crossed by other discourse, or perhaps, by the discourse of other? Fear of being guided by other? Fear of being under tutelage? But aren't we always crossed by discourses? Ours? Others'? What sense does exist in this "property"? On these aspects Jacotot warns us that:

"We do not have a necessity of learning rhetoric to be submitted to its empire. Heart is more eloquent, and by consequence, the most dangerous orator. But there are circumstances in which reasonable men (as far he can be) abandons himself with taste to the sweet illusions, to the charming of imagination which gives birth, in front of his eyes, to all colors he desires, according to the object which affront." (ibid., p. 123)

And in this moment Jacotot advises us: "it's necessary to go by ourselves to the word combat" (ibid., p. 224). There's anyone else to call for. That's the sense of an emancipated intelligence. To learn nobody can give what you already have, what you can only reach by exercising what every man is disposed with: intelligence. Using the instruments everyone has, the possession of word, the possession of *logos*, though philosophy's attempts to restrict that. Confronted with his critics Jacotot says:

"Have my students become orators like Bossuet? I answer it lacks much time of work to someone become a Bossuet; but by dismantling this indirect question, proposed from the above to hide what someone thinks from the bottom, and translating myself what they say into what they want to say, I ask: Have my students become humans like you, the ones who speak? Yes, no doubt: we'll make a confrontation when you feel comfortable with" (ibid., p. 88-89)

Humans who speak, who know how to speak, humans equal to everyone else, including the ones who lead. That's all what the ignorant schoolmaster teaches us, all his intellectual emancipation. All his power, all his subversive power, a power continued to be hidden. To the "pedagogical" relationship a unique rule:

"... recommend this unique rule to your students. All rhetoric is there. Be them [discourses' facts] elegant, harmonious, magnificent, including sublime: do not follow till the clouds, there's no invention,

nothing of genius: observe and say what you see. When you've learnt Bossuet's discourse, repeat it without stopping, verify every other and improvise" (ibid. p. 203).

We would have a lot to say of *Langue Maternelle*, many discourses to compose from this piece, this powerful piece. In this paper it's only possible to repeat it and reflect over a small part of what is, there, old/new. Perhaps in another opportunity we may produce a new/old discourse. I would like to finish this presentation, though, with a little "pedagogical-political" indication of Jacotot which I think remains very contemporary to think the relation we maintain with rhetoric, especially in my case, the relation between rhetoric and education, rhetoric and politics:

"It's not because we begin by the rudiments we astray ourselves, it's because we still don't know them by leaving school" (ibid., p. 27)

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