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► **To cite this version:**

Charles Ramond. “ What Will Remain of Humanities Institutions in the Post-Human Era? – Remarks on Jacques Rancière and Self-Emancipation ”, Traduit du français par Jack STETTER. International Conference “Future of the Human & Future of the Humanities”, Sangkyu SHIN, Ewha Institute for The Humanities, Ewha Womans University, Nov 2016, Séoul, South Korea. hal-04217382

HAL Id: hal-04217382

<https://hal.science/hal-04217382>

Submitted on 27 Sep 2023

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[Colloque Séoul, *The future of humanities in the posthuman era*, Université Ewha, 11-12 novembre 2016. 3000-4000 mots en anglais, 20 à 25 mn de présentation, suivis de 10 mn de discussion]

What Will Remain of Humanities Institutions in the Post-Human Era? Remarks on Jacques Rancière and Self-Emancipation

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It is paradoxical to ask what could become of “humanities” in a “post-human” world – if even such a world is conceivable. How could a “post-human” world be anything other than a “post-humanities” world ? With respect to these questions, our reasoning is at best relative, not absolute : in effect, we cannot by definition have an idea of what a truly “post-human” world would be like. We can however trace the lines of humanity’s continuous evolution. If we understand by “humanity” a condition (the “human condition”) composed of our limitations and our consciousness of these limitations ; a therefore essentially unhappy or tragic condition, since this is neither the happy condition of animals (who do not have a consciousness of their limits), nor the happy condition of post-humans (who would have no more limits and would live, as Houellebecq writes in *Elementary Particles*, in the “unlimited” or “limitlessness”) – therefore humanity, issued out of animality, has forever made an effort to rejoin this post-humanity and rediscover its lost happiness.

In this march unto the end of suffering and death, humanity would not however have a reason to abandon the “humanities”. In a long, happy post-human life, without suffering and accomplished, humanities would on the contrary have an important role to play, in the image of the *otium* looked for by the Romans.

Everyone's culture would explode : we would have the time to learn multiple languages, the history of many countries, we would have the time to read and re-read writers and philosophers, to travel the world, to practice many arts... Post-humanity, as many dream of it today, would without a doubt resemble the image of the "humanist" from the Renaissance as evoked by Rabelais in Chapters 23 and 24 of *Gargantua* and Chapter 8 of *Pantagruel*, where the father asks his son to become an "abyss of science" in order to become an accomplished man. The more we shall approach the post-human state, that is to say a conscious limitlessness, the more we shall engage with the "humanities", that is to say towards this entirely cultivated life of which most of us are deprived, or from which we are separated, due to the constraints of work, poverty, suffering, and the briefness of life...

In this predictable movement from humanity to a post-humanity full of "humanities", the Internet, as always, plays the role of an immense accelerator, and it lets us envision an entirely new relationship to "humanities" that it might accomplish while paradoxically making disappear in large part. Allow me to explain this paradox. The effort to make the humanities available, to put them within our grasp and "at hand", to borrow a Heideggerian formula, progresses at an extraordinary pace thanks to the Internet, with such a speed that it is modifying the traditional relation of transmission, consubstantial with these "humanities" themselves. Today, any child connected to the Internet has access to the whole of human culture : immensely richer and bigger encyclopedias than any of the past, free-access books, journals, information, but also music, images, paintings, guides, explanations concerning the practices of all of the hard sciences... This is so much so the case that the "classes", the "seminars", the "conferences", etc., that we deliver in the Universities are no longer but a small part of this immense whole, entirely available, welcoming, patient, and free.

This universal availability of culture puts certain fundamental questions to learning and education institutions, where "humanities" are transmitted, as in Universities for example. I more and more often give classes "assisted with a computer", that is to say where I ask students present to connect to the Internet and verify, check, or read on their machine the documents about which I am speaking with them. This leads me at times to ask about the pertinence of this type of transmission. I suppose that these questions are also often your own, dear Colleagues and Students... In short, what is the point of giving multiple times the same class that could be filmed and put online once and for all ? And which, by these means, would be accessible to the entire world, for a long time if not forever, whereas the classes we give at specific and fixed hours only affect one single public and for a limited timespan. What amazing savings to be had in terms of buildings, travels, fatigue, and even our carbon footprints ! With respect to certain technological advances (for example as with the passage from cathode-tube screens to flat-screens, a passage which in itself will be soon forgotten), the new situation seems to offer nothing but advantages, without any perceptible inconvenient as compared to the old situation.

We can make a general portrait (which will please some and maybe displease others) of what might come of the institutions that currently transmit the “humanities” : professors would calmly give their classes at their own homes, in front of a webcam, while students themselves just as calmly follow along from their own homes, on their computers, when that is to their convenience, as often as necessary... Both professors and students alike would be dispensed with the need to move across town, to repeat themselves, to ask questions, to meet together, perhaps even with all confrontations of any sort... According to this new mode of transmission of “humanities”, we would be almost dispensed with the need to frequent other “humans”, unless in a deliberate fashion of course. Libraries, universities, cafeterias, and metros would remain deserted, whereas students, and humanity in general (since we should favorably consider the possibility of pursuing studies throughout one’s life) would become more and more knowledgeable... In short, we would witness the disappearance [ˌdɪsəˈpiərəns] of the “human” role in the transmission of “humanities”, though historically the “human” role was always central, determinant, and primary, through the part played by “parents”, “professors”, “pedagogues”, and “masters” of every sort, including the “coach” so celebrated in our time by the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk. In a post-human world, all of this could disappear, to the profit of a system of auto-education, or a generalized “auto-didacticism”, which we see is already being put into place day after day.

The disappearance in a “post-human” world, not of “humanities” as a whole (on the contrary), but of the form and current institutions charged with their transmission is part and parcel of a vast movement of auto-didacticism that is permitted and encouraged by the Internet on a number of levels. Although a man’s culture (and therefore his humanity) was always dependent on the direct intervention of other humans (parents, pedagogues, professors, masters, confessors, judges, and statesmen), and therefore on an essential heteronomy, we are now directing ourselves, thanks to the existence of the Internet, towards a sort of autonomy in every form possible : self-diagnostics, self-medication, self-evaluation, self-management, self-education, self-help... Such practices might seem not only dangerous (such as where medicine is concerned), but absurd and impossible (such as where learning is concerned). Nevertheless, auto-didacticism and self-emancipation have historically often been theorized and positively valued.

For example, at the end of *Gargantua*, Rabelais describes the life of the “thelemites”, or inhabitants of the abbey of Theleme, an utopia of happy human life : “their entire life was directed, not by laws, statutes, or rules, but according to their volition and free will. Waking from bed when they wished, drinking, eating, working, sleeping when the desire came to them ; nobody awoke them, nobody forced them to drink, to eat, nor to do whatever else. In this manner Gargantua established it. And their rule was only this clause : “Do what you want.” (Ch. 57). According to a paradox already similar to that which I am trying to show you, Rabelais conceived of auto-didacticism, self-instruction or self-teaching (the utopian abbey of Theleme constituting in this sense a sort of approximation of “post-humanity”) as the

culmination or the accomplishment of the humanist education described at the beginning of the book, and in which the student or child had to consecrate the totality of his time for many years, from the morning until the evening, and under the stiff authority of their masters, to the study of the “humanities” (*Gargantua* Ch. 23: “How Gargantua was taught by Ponocrates *with such a discipline that he never lost an hour a day*” [Underlined CR]). In this century of humanism, Montaigne knew Latin better than the rest, because, while a child, his father, rather than giving him Latin professors, had decided that everyone would speak Latin at the home, such that Montaigne learned Latin like a mother tongue, without a method and without professors, alone like all children.

The work of Jacques Rancière *The Ignorant Schoolteacher: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (published in French in 1987) also fits into this tradition of valorizing auto-didacticism. The book presents and recalls the sensational career of Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840) who, during the first half of the 19th century, “threw the European intelligentsia into a panic”¹ by teaching, with success and to an ever-more enthusiastic public, material that he himself did not know whatsoever (Dutch, drawing, music)... The success of Jacotot had put into doubt the very foundation of education that presupposes a hierarchy of knowledge separating the master or schoolteacher from the student. Jacotot, who had demanded that on his tomb at the Père Lachaise cemetery be written “I believe that God created the human soul capable of teaching itself by itself, and without a master,”² represents for Rancière the very model of “emancipation”, that is to say the unshakeable belief in the equality of intelligences. Perhaps Jacotot would have been able to find a predecessor and ally in the figure of Socrates, who declared “the only thing I know is that I know nothing,” and who at the moment of philosophy’s birth seemed to prefigure the “ignorant master”. Socrates, as one knows, effectively did make his interlocutors learn (or rather remember) truths that he himself ignored. However, Jacotot, rather than considering himself as a modern Socrates, reproaches Socrates for a sort of hypocrisy, by which Socrates pretended to be ignorant while simultaneously directing his interlocutor. In a famous scene in the *Menon*, Socrates made a slave discover the doubling of a square. However, as Jacotot remarked, the slave had remained a slave before and after the demonstration³ : his new knowledge had not in fact been able to emancipate him. Only a truly ignorant master would be capable of emancipation.

Jacotot equally criticized the pedagogical and progressive style of “public instruction” which was the great affair of European nations in the late 19th century. To believe in “pedagogues” who will make the ignorant “progress” meant that the ignorant were and would always be a step behind the pedagogues, which was and remained for Jacotot the contrary of a emancipatory gesture. Jacotot, and Rancière after him, could have nevertheless reclaimed Descartes as one of their own, who in the very first lines of his *Discourse on the Method* claimed that “good sense is the

¹ *Le Maître Ignorant*, fourth cover.

² *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, p. 139.

³ *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, p. 29 sq.

world's most shared thing"; good sense, that is to say, as Descartes specified, "the power... to distinguish the true from the false" or "reason" (we would say most certainly "intelligence"), which for this reason was "naturally" for Descartes "equal in all men"⁴, since it would be meaningless to speak of a capacity to distinguish "a little" or "partially" the true from the false – a reason for which, as we know, Descartes claimed that this capacity was entirely unknown to animals.

Other than the fundamental postulate of an equality of intelligences, the fundamental argument in favor of auto-didacticism, according to Jacotot, was the fact that little children learn, without exception, without professors or teaching, without a method and without pedagogy, their mother tongue. A language is a hard thing to learn : the best proof consists in the fact that even after working for a long time with professors, we rarely know a second language as well as our mother tongue. Auto-didacticism therefore is a critique of the very idea of a "teaching method" or "pedagogy". Rancière and Jacotot might have been able to adopt the famous title of Paul Feyerabend's book, *Against Method* (1975; subtitled *Outline of an anarchist theory of knowledge*). But their thesis is even more radical than Feyerabend's thesis : they claim that knowledge can be easily acquired "without a method", not only in the sciences, but in every theoretical discipline and human practice. Jacotot and Rancière defended therefore the "method of the riddle"⁵ or the "method of chance"⁶ which only carries the name of a "method" as a mockery. Jacques Rancière himself always claims to be an autodidact in his work. He often said that he worked at the National Library according to the whims of what he encountered and read, one leading to another, and so on, without really ever adopting a plan or method.

For Jacotot and Rancière, therefore, learning a mother tongue by "guessing," "repetition," "essays and errors", must be considered as the model of all human learning : "According to the unequal returns of various intellectual apprenticeships, what all human children learn best is *what no master can explain to them* : the mother tongue [Underlined CR]"⁷. This argument is quite striking. In fact, little children, who by definition cannot read or write, and who therefore cannot use any manual or method, learn their mother tongue without exception, and never forget it. Each individual, from this point of view, is the living example of a learning done step by step, blindly, through guessing, and yet entirely successful. It can be tempting, as Jacotot proposes, to take these successes as a model and to claim that we would

⁴ The equality of human minds is extended by Descartes to the children, as he explicitly states in the second part of the *Discourse on Method*: « N'y ayant qu'une vérité de chaque chose, quiconque la trouve en sait autant qu'on en peut savoir ; et [...] par exemple, un enfant instruit en l'arithmétique, ayant fait une addition suivant ses règles, se peut assurer d'avoir trouvé, touchant la somme qu'il examinait, tout ce que l'esprit humain saurait trouver ». (Edition Adam-Tannery, vol. VI, p. 21, l. 7-13). »

⁵ *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, p. 10: "Wasn't that shameful method of the riddle the true movement of human intelligence taking possession of its own power?"

⁶ *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, p. 12.

⁷ *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, p. 5.

learn all the better other disciplines without masters and without methods. Auto-didacticism thus presents itself as the “natural”⁸ learning method.

Jacotot and Rancière wanted to construct a non-hierarchical relation : the contrary of a method in which the knowing master would actively “explain” a difficulty to a student who, because of this, would “understand” passively as if receiving a light from elsewhere. Thus does auto-didacticism put into question the very notion of an “explanation” in the study of the “humanities”. There is in effect almost always an element of self-explanation in the books we read. Why then explain once again what the author already explains ? How do we know that the explanations we give to our students are any clearer than the explanations the author gives ? For Rancière the necessity of explanations is a myth : in reality, there is no incapacity to understand. This so-called *incapacity* is a fiction, which allows us to “divide up humanity” into “knowing minds” against “ignorant minds.” All of his philosophy, in general, consists in combating this division, or, as he says, this “splitting up” of reality between the “superior” and the “inferior”, a splitting up which is political and not scientific. As he says in a very provocative manner : he who “explains”, with the best intentions in the world, will in fact “stultify”. This is why, contrary to what might be believed, Jacotot and Rancière do not recognize the State’s right or need to teach children, “for the simple reason that one doesn’t owe people what they can take for themselves.”⁹

The idea of Jacotot was that the smallest text contains the totality of mankind’s intelligence, and therefore allows for emancipation. As we see in *Planet of the Apes*, it is sufficient to trace a triangle and “a few” coherent mathematical signs to demonstrate that one possesses a human intelligence in its “totality”. There is the origin of the name that Jacotot had given to his emancipatory method : “universal teaching” or the “panecastic”¹⁰ “looks for the whole (*pan*) of the human intelligence in each (*ekastos*) intellectual manifestation.”

Jacotot was thus the prophet, or the apostle, of auto-didacticism. Just as Spinoza revealed to mankind that everyone was eternal, and possesses an adequate idea of God, Jacotot did not come to teach something new to men, but rather came to “announce” that they could all learn for themselves : “The matter was thus clear. This was not a method for instructing the people ; it was a benefit to be announced to the poor : they could do everything any man could. It sufficed only to *announce* it. Jacotot decided to devote himself to this.”¹¹ The message, we see, resembles a piece of “good news”, that is to say the “gospel”, the gospel of auto-didacticism. It lacked none of the quasi-miraculous aspect of its results, nor did the mockery or solitude or forgetting of the one who had brought the news.

If we accredit these theses of an auto-didactic emancipation, we must conclude that, rather than disappearing once and for all in an uncultivated and

⁸ *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, p. 122, 124, 126, 134.

⁹ *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, p. 106-107.

¹⁰ *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, p. 39, p. 135 sq.

¹¹ *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, p. 18.

barbarous world, “humanities” will develop to infinite in the “post-human” world. The humanities might however do without the human, collective, and heteronomous mode of transmission that was traditionally their own. We will go further towards immanence more and more immanent, of learning and of our immersion in the oceans of the humanities. The Internet allows already for this re-appropriation and auto-didacticism. One practically never sees adolescents reading the guide manuals of video games and technical objects : this might seem strange from our point of view, we who learned grammars from textbooks, but they learn rules directly in playing, in attempting, step by step, by essays and errors, and this works out for them. The immense popularity of detective novels, from the end of the 19th century to our days (a literary genre which was absolutely unknown before) works perhaps in the same way : the detective novel is in effect most often for its reader an invitation to “make a guess”, just as little children are without end obliged to “guess” in order to learn by themselves their mother tongues and resolve the enigmas of the world that surround them. We could also evoke the recent phenomenon, which in my eyes is quite striking, of “unschooling”, that is to say these families in the US as elsewhere which do not put their children to school, and do not put them into the hands of masters, nor into the framework of a discipline of study, and yet, or so it would seem, the children, and later the adults, flourish.

Thank you very much for your attention.¹²

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¹² The present text was translated into English by Jack Stetter, assistant lecturer and researcher in philosophy at l’Université Paris 8, to whom I address my gratitude.