

The Philosopher and His Poor

JACQUES RANCIÈRE



Edited and with an Introduction by Andrew Parker

Translated by John Drury, Corinne Oster, and Andrew Parker

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

THE ENGLISH TRANSLATION of Jacques Rancière's *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres* has had, already, a curious history. In the mid-1990s Books in Print announced that it was available from Temple University Press in a translation by John Drury, who earlier had translated Rancière's first book for that press, *The Nights of Labor*. When, after making repeated inquiries, I found it impossible to obtain the new book, Temple admitted that it had never gone into production and subsequently voided the contract—though as of today it retains a Temple ISBN and is listed as available for purchase on Amazon.com. (A strange way for a book to be ahead of its time.) No one seemed to know, moreover, whether a copy of Drury's manuscript existed and, if so, where it could be located. At Rancière's suggestion I contacted Donald Reid, the University of North Carolina historian who had written the introduction to *The Nights of Labor*; he discovered in his files what was, perhaps, the only extant copy of Drury's work—an initial draft, with some of Rancière's emendations, of the first two-thirds of the book. That early partial version was then corrected by Corinne Oster, a graduate student in comparative literature at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, who also drafted the book's remaining chapters. Encouraged that the manuscript finally was nearing completion, I revised it in its entirety with the goal of making Rancière's highly allusive prose sound as English as possible.

Though perhaps not too English. If, as Jonathan Rée has suggested, "thinking only becomes philosophical when familiar words grow strange," then "serious philosophical writing" can be recognized by its propensity to read "like a translation already."¹ One mark of this seriousness may be the ways such writing exploits as a resource its non-self-identity, a possibility embraced by *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres* in the scrupulousness with which it measures not only the distance between its own French and Plato's Greek or Marx's German, but also that between "its own French" and itself. Rancière often presses hard on a number of terms whose polyvalency will be lost or neutralized by any single

English equivalent. Thus *partage* is “division” and “sharing,” and both of these antithetical senses must be kept in mind even when, depending on context, we opt in the translation for one or the other.² Similarly, a *savant* can be an expert, a scholar, or a scientist; though we limit ourselves in each chapter to using only one of the three, the different nuances between them resonate in the original. *Fin* is translated generally as “end,” though on occasion it will also appear as “aim,” “goal,” “purpose,” or “conclusion.” The neutral “actor” and the more pejorative “comedian” are both renderings of *comédién*; Rancière plays systematically with this tension which, again, is unavailable in the English cognates. These are only a few of the many problems that we simply record in our translation rather than resolve. However inelegant it may be to insert a number of bracketed French phrases in our text, we do so to remind our English-language readers of what they are missing.

We employ whenever possible published English translations of the texts Rancière discusses, though on occasion these have been altered tacitly to conform to the terms of his usage. Parenthetical interpolations are always by Rancière, while those placed between square brackets—whether in the text proper or the notes—are by the translators.

This project was underwritten in part by an Amherst College Faculty Research Grant. Many individuals also provided indispensable aid: I am happy to acknowledge various debts to Derek Attridge, Judith Butler, John Drury, Maud Ellmann, Robert Gooding-Williams, Rick Griffiths, Margaret Groesbeck, Nat Herold, Fredric Jameson, Michael Kasper, Nancy Kuhl, Meredith McGill, Corinne Oster, Catherine Portuges, Lisa Raskin, Donald Reid, Bruce Robbins, Robert Schwartzwald, Anita Sokolsky, and Abby Zanger. My greatest debt of course is to Jacques Rancière, who was never stinting in his kindness, enthusiasm, or patience. Despite so much excellent assistance, this translation remains, perforce, imperfect. Its flaws are mine alone.

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Mimesis and the Division of Labor

Are they my poor?

RALPH WALDO EMERSON,
"Self-Reliance"

WHAT HAS PHILOSOPHY to do with the poor? If, as has often been supposed, the poor have no time for philosophy, then why have philosophers always made time for them? Why is the history of philosophy—from Plato and Marx to Sartre and Pierre Bourdieu—the history of so many figures of the poor: plebes, men of iron, the *demos*, artisans, common people, proletarians, lumpen, series, groups in fusion, masses? Why have philosophers made the shoemaker (of all workers) a remarkably ubiquitous presence in this history? Does philosophy constitute itself in thinking of the poor? If so, can it ever refrain from thinking for them?

Jacques Rancière's *The Philosopher and His Poor* meditates on these questions in its close readings of major texts of Western thought in which the poor have played a leading role—sometimes as the objects of philosophical analysis, sometimes as illustrations of philosophical argument. Published in France in 1983 and made available here for the first time in English, the book is a consummate earlier study by a figure increasingly known today in the Anglophone world for his pathbreaking writings on the nature of equality.¹ *The Philosopher and His Poor* initiates an exploration of themes and questions to which Rancière will return over the course of what continues to be a singular intellectual and political itinerary. But the book's significance is not merely historical. A series of linked essays assessing the consequences for Marx, Sartre, and Bourdieu of Plato's admonition that workers should do "nothing else" than their own work, it offers innovative readings of these figures in turn as each struggles to elaborate a philosophy of the poor. The long chapter on Bourdieu should prove today to be of special interest given the extraordinary atten-

tion his work has received since his death in 2002. Presenting a left critique of Bourdieu the terms of which are largely unknown to an English-language readership, *The Philosopher and His Poor* remains remarkably timely twenty years after its initial publication.

Rancière was in his early forties when the book appeared in France, and he alludes in his foreword to the twenty years' worth of "detours" that interrupted his progress: "a seminar on *Capital* called to an unexpected notoriety; a thesis on Feuerbach interrupted by the din of the street; some time spent circulating between university halls and factory doors; ten years of research in worker archives" (xxv). Rancière had been a student in Louis Althusser's famous seminar on structural Marxism whose work led in 1965 to *Reading Capital*, the group project to which Rancière contributed an important essay not included in the original English translation.² After the events of May '68 ("the din of the street"), Rancière turned decisively away from this work, publishing in 1969 an essay highly critical of Althusser's teaching that he expanded into book-length form in 1974. Charging that Althusserianism secured its elite status by distinguishing between science (its own) and ideology, he later called this critique "a first clearing of the terrain for a longer-term reflection on the philosophical and historical relations between knowledge and the masses."³ An active participant at this time in Maoist student-worker organizations that kept him "circulating between university halls and factory doors," Rancière helped to found in 1975 the journal *Révoltes logiques*, whose approach to the social history of labor was predicated on the hard-won acknowledgment that what professional intellectuals said about workers and what workers said about themselves were often different things.⁴ What followed for Rancière was a decade-long immersion in neglected nineteenth-century labor archives in an effort "to establish what working-class tradition was, and to study how Marxism interpreted and distorted it. For many years I took no more interest in philosophy. More specifically, I turned my back on what might be called political theories, and read nothing but archive material. I posited the existence of a specifically working-class discourse."⁵ This assumption that the working class indeed had a voice of its own—a voice that found authentic expression in an "indigenous" form of artisanal socialism—led to the publication in 1976 of *La Parole ouvrière*, a wide-ranging collection of nineteenth-century worker texts that Rancière edited with Alain Faure.⁶

It was, however, just this assumption that Rancière began to challenge next in a series of essays dating from the late 1970s and early '80s. Where he had expected the archives to disclose an image of the working class behaving for the most part "like itself" (that is, autonomously), he discovered instead "a working class which was more mobile, less attached to its tools and less sunk in its own poverty and drunkenness than the various traditions usually represent it" —a class, in short, that had no "itself" to which it could conform.⁷ Rancière found, for example, that the value of "pride in work" was far from a universal working-class norm; indeed, the most militant tradesmen were those, like the shoemakers, who desired most to escape from the monotony of their jobs—those whose work allowed them to imagine doing something else than that to which they seemingly were fated. Now criticizing *La Parole ouvrière* for having given "excessive credit to the idea of a workers' discourse collectively addressed to the bourgeoisie," Rancière concluded from his new research that "we look too much at worker culture and not enough at its encounters with other cultures."⁸ Such engagements between classes in public and semi-public spaces furnished nineteenth-century workers not only with relief from the drudgery of their tasks but also, in a remarkable number of instances, opportunities to try their hand at imitating the discourses, genres, and tastes of the bourgeoisie. Violating class-specific rules of decorum in expressing a voice not their own, these imitations harbored, for Rancière, a politically explosive potential unremarked by Marxist theorists and labor historians alike in their common anticipation of a working-class essence:

For it is possible that any disruption of the prevailing system came less from a specific working-class culture than from these singular apprenticeships in a common culture; it was less a question of an uncivilized culture than of an uncivilized relationship with culture, or, to put it another way, of a culture in disorder (where the prevailing system was in the process of disruption). A worker who had never learned how to write and yet tried to compose verses to suit the taste of his times was perhaps more of a danger to the prevailing ideological order than a worker who performed revolutionary songs.⁹

Challenging received boundaries between the domains of head and hand, arrogating to themselves the leisure to think and write

to which workers were not entitled, the nineteenth-century figures to whom Rancière was drawn conducted experiments in the politics of *mélange*—what a current idiom calls hybridity. He warned that unless we can learn to be surprised by what the archive offers—working-class writing structured not by an expected homogeneity but by a constitutive iterability, an imitative incorporation of discursive norms foreign to itself—“we thus run the risk of reconfirming the old philosophical adage that workers not concern themselves with anything beside their work.”¹⁰

This old adage is expressly disconfirmed both in *The Philosopher and His Poor* and in the volume that preceded it by two years and is in many ways its companion, *The Nights of Labor*.¹¹ “Readers should not look for any metaphors in my title” (vii), Rancière explained: *The Nights of Labor* recounts what occupied the evenings of a great many mid-nineteenth-century French workers—writing. Following hundreds of worker-intellectuals who found themselves “doubly and irremediably excluded for living as workers did and speaking as bourgeois people did” (ix), the book relates in loving detail the experiences of those who—like the philosopher-floor layer Gabriel Gauny, and like other workers who wrote poetry, debated the Christian socialism of the newspaper *L’Atelier*, engaged in dialogue with Saint-Simonians and Fourierists, or projected Icarian communities abroad—undermined “the ancestral hierarchy subordinating those dedicated to manual labor to those who have been given the privilege of thinking” (viii).¹² An experiment in anti-positivist social history, the book refrains formally from taking the writings it surveys as the ingredients of documentary. Indeed, it discounts the project of recovering authentic worker voices since these workers relinquished all claims to authenticity in their very act of writing: they were “not men and women bearing the word of the masses, but bearing simply the word.”¹³ What gave this writing its political efficacy was not that it reflected or embodied a specific class identity but that it disrupted such identities in miming the norms of a culture foreign to its writers’ origins. The “equality” to which these workers aspired thus would be less simply a theme that they addressed in their texts than a speech event, the very condition of their performance as writers. In his later work Rancière will define equality not as a goal to be achieved over time but as a founding axiom, and we see already the nucleus of this view in his demonstration in *The Nights of Labor* that the mere fact of writing, for its worker-intellectuals,

was radically democratizing, since it verified in practice that they were capable of producing not just noise but reasoned discourse.¹⁴ Interestingly, some readers judged the book itself to be insufficiently reasoned, one reviewer admitting perplexity over its “a-conceptualism,” another complaining that it skimmed on explanation: “*The Nights of Labor* is more a work of philosophical meditation than conventional historical analysis. Rancière makes little effort to set his writers in context, compare them systematically, or even make explicit his own working assumptions or line of argument.”¹⁵ But this reticence would be the point, for the book’s anti-positivism entails that the historian can be no more self-identical than the writers he takes as his model. If we are unable here to differentiate systematically Rancière’s “working assumptions” from Gauny’s—if we fail to disentangle “objective” narration from free indirect discourse—this reflects the book’s commitment to an equality legible even in the form of its *Darstellung*.¹⁶ Deconstructing the split between thinker and worker in its subject and in its structure, *The Nights of Labor* is as much (or as little) a work of literature as it is history or philosophy.¹⁷

The Philosopher and His Poor, by contrast, looks like a traditional work of philosophy: though more “literary” than many such works in its highly allusive prose, the texts it considers are nonetheless familiarly canonical where its predecessor’s were obscurely archival. And where it proved difficult in *The Nights of Labor* to differentiate Rancière’s voice from that of his worker subjects, *The Philosopher and His Poor* seems instead to respect philosophical protocol: its readers will likely find it easier to tell its author apart from the figures he reads—and this will be the case especially whenever Rancière’s argument turns critical, as in the chapter on Bourdieu. In revisiting classic philosophical topoi from Plato’s three metals to Sartre’s wall, Rancière canvasses what amounts to a history of Western philosophy from the ancient Greeks through the twentieth century. But in telling that history as the history of formal thinking about the poor, the book no longer qualifies unequivocally as philosophy but as a reflection on its closure. Rancière argues that in Bourdieu as much as Plato, the poor comprise in their very exclusion from the vocation of philosopher the condition of philosophical possibility. Present as objects rather than subjects of knowledge, appearing only in the guise of philosophy’s *exempla*, the poor enable the philosopher to constitute himself—as other than the poor. To pursue this argument, how-

ever, is immediately to force the question of whether *The Philosopher and His Poor* is, or ever could be, a work of philosophy. Can Rancière speak as a philosopher while exposing the exclusions that constitute philosophy? If philosophy depends for its existence on its foreclosure of the poor, from what space could the book situate the limits of philosophy without already having compromised that space and those limits? No wonder this book is so fond of the Cretan Liar's Paradox!¹⁸ At once philosophical and necessarily other than that, closer in its heterogeneity to *The Night of Labor* than it first may appear, *The Philosopher and His Poor* embraces in its objects and discourses the hybridity that philosophy seeks to expunge or reduce in going about "its own business."

While Rancière shares with other recent French thinkers this preoccupation with the heterogeneous, he is unique in discerning the steady pressure of "the poor" behind philosophy's attempts to secure its autonomy.¹⁹ Though the names given to the poor have changed over time, their essential function—to play the ersatz of philosophy—remains constant: "An ersatz that philosophy cannot do without since, in order to preserve its role in the legislation of legitimate thoughts, it is itself obliged to produce a discourse on non-philosophy, on illegitimate modes of thinking" (131). In Plato's *Republic*, the ersatz is first and foremost the artisan "who can do only one thing at a time" since he has been given the time to do only one thing—his trade and nothing else (4). Plato takes extraordinary pains to keep the artisan occupied exclusively with "his own business" so as to preclude his pursuit of the different business on which the philosopher enjoys a monopoly. Though Plato occasionally enlists the artisan to furnish homespun models for the practice of philosophy, the artisan threatens philosophy more often since he is preeminently a technician who lodges within himself the capacity for an unrestrained polytechnics. The sophist Hippias, hybridity personified, merely exacerbates this potential; doing many more things than one, he is "the philosopher's living counterfeit—the artisan of lies, the intellectual jack-of-all-trades [*bricoleur*] whom the mob confusedly equates with the philosopher: the sophist" (31). But only the philosopher has the right to lie, and that lie is a whopper since it "explains" a division of labor in which the philosopher's "own position cannot figure at all" (33): the myth of the three metals barring artisan pretenders from following philosophy's path. Rancière suggests that this mythical account of social hierarchy is not simply "a 'pro-slavery'

discourse designed to justify an inegalitarian social order or to shut men up in the 'totalitarianism' of its idea"; philosophy's concern "is less to lock others up than to protect itself from them," to defend its own sanctuary against interlopers from below (52). Yet despite these prophylactic measures, the artisan remains a problem that philosophy cannot master in its own terms:

He is not a free man sharing in the virtue of the city, but neither is he a slave whose virtues derive from the diligent administration of the domestic economy. A false free man and part-time slave, the artisan belongs neither to his trade nor to the one who assigns him work. He cannot derive virtue from his own sphere or from a relationship of dependence. But one who has no virtue has no nature. The artisan is not simply a lowly being to be kept away from the government of the city. Properly speaking, he is an impossible being, an unthinkable nature. The free worker of the market economy is a denatured being, an accident of history. Neither included nor excluded, this hybridity is an unpardonable disturbance for the city. (24)

The artisan is no more thinkable for Marx, for whom "the poor" is not the working class but its disappropriation as the proletariat, the non-class that has its "own work" to do: revolution (70). Drawn to contradiction instead of *mélange*, Marx follows Plato in resisting the double, the bastard, the polytechnic. While in a celebrated passage Marx imagines that with the advent of communism man will be able to do many things each day, the occupations he lists are discrete and contiguous rather than hybridized, and if "neither industrial fabrication nor artistic imitation" is included among them, this is "certainly the most radical way of not mixing the two together" (67). Though he opposes praxis "to productions of technique, what Aristotle called 'poietics'" (209), Marx nonetheless experiences a world in which *technē* remains irreducible, the worker insufficiently proletarianized, the scientist too much like his conjuring adversary, the historical irremediably theatrical. Casting the *lumpen* in the role of scapegoat, Marx discovers ultimately that the hybridity he seeks to purge not only afflicts all classes but lies even closer to home with the Straubinger bohemians—the Cretan Liars of communism (82–89). Sartre, similarly, dreams of a world in which "a worker and a philosopher no longer will be technicians but virtually, already, subjects of the group"—a world where matter could work

“by itself before the prestidigitations of technique can begin” (162, 164). Even so, as Rancière indicates, “the universe of ordinary technique remains what it always was for Plato: the universe of splintered rationality belonging to those bastard beings—‘amphibians,’ Sartre calls them—who are artisans. A world of undecidable ends, of fabrications that become imitations of themselves, of partial socialities—short-circuits in which is lost the explosive force of the Nothing that engenders the All” (155). There is, for Sartre, less time than ever (and even more fatigue to overcome) for workers to be able to do two things at once—which means that his “poor,” too, can only ever do what they do already, and nothing else: “In the realm of vulgar fatigue there is no place for vulgar freedom, the sort that is earned or lost or regained, that goes astray or loses itself in the intervals of exploitation—the freedom of male and female workers who decide that *they have the leisure* to think of something else while working; the time after work to learn; the possibility of writing literate prose or verse; the choice of having the children they *cannot* have or of not having the children they *should* have; the obligation of organizing worker societies that they do not *have the right* to create or the time to run: in short, the luxury that they *cannot treat themselves to*” (146–47). That this luxury is exclusively the philosopher’s constitutes the limit of a philosophy of freedom—of “the only true freedom, that of the philosopher, which is conceivable and operative only as the exact opposite of the impotence of serialized individuals” (147).

For Pierre Bourdieu as well, “the poor” can do only one thing at a time—and this even though he is widely known as a critic of class privilege. Though Bourdieu’s sociology is hostile to Plato and to philosophy’s masking of social distinction, Rancière argues that this sociological reversal of Platonism is “only the confirmation, indeed the radicalization, of its interdictions” (204). As explained in the Afterword, *The Philosopher and His Poor* mounted its lively critique of Bourdieu at the moment when the new Socialist government of the early ’80s, committed to reducing inequality in education, took Bourdieu’s *The Inheritors*, *Reproduction and Distinction* as its program. As these books are more influential today than ever, Rancière’s critique retains its point. Perpetuating the hierarchy it purports to reduce, Bourdieu’s sociology assumes an inequality even more obdurate than Plato’s since, for Rancière, its logic is now necessary rather than arbitrary—and this is a logic only the sociologist can read (204). Even while condemn-

ing philosophy for its naturalization of class distinctions, the sociologist-king presupposes that the poor can only ever do their own business, for such homogeneity is what Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* entails (178). The hybrid writer-intellectuals of *The Nights of Labor* would be inconceivable on this model since "the denunciation of the *scholē* also denounces the parvenu who arrogates to himself the leisure to study that he does not have" (175). If no one ever strays here from his or her *habitus*, this is only because sociological analysis demands "the suppression of intermediaries, of points of meeting and exchange between people of reproduction and the elite of distinction": "Everything happens as if the science of the sociologist-king had the same requirement as the city of the philosopher-king. There must be no mixing, no imitation" (189). Nowhere, then, is there the slightest chance that "the popular *gestus* could, by accident or fraud, meet up with the bourgeois *gestus*" (191). Impervious to the poor's "aesthetic and militant passion for reappropriation," Bourdieu resists making room for "an allodoxia that is the only way to heterodoxia" (200). It is rather Kant and Schiller who can make such room in offering, Rancière concludes, "a fiction of the possible responding to the fiction of the impossible, a utopia opening again the space bolted shut by the myth of the three metals" (199).²⁰

Where Gaston Bachelard proclaimed that "there is no science but the science of the hidden," Rancière responds by saying that distinctions between mere appearance and concealed truth reflect only the needs of those who profit from maintaining these distinctions: does mystification exist anywhere but in the words of the demystifier? (170, 173). For this very reason *The Philosopher and His Poor* is best regarded as neither an "ideology critique" nor a "symptomatic reading" of Platonism and its political legacies: "nothing in fact is concealed" by Plato, who indeed "has no propensity for dissimulating inequality" (18, 206). Though Rancière puts great weight on the question of language—recall that he defines equality as a speech event—his project, so different from Habermas's or from Foucault's, takes its measured distance from philosophy's "linguistic turn."²¹ Rancière obviously shares with Derrida a fascination with an other that is not philosophy's own, and the notion of the *demos* as supplement that Rancière develops in his later work clearly owes something to deconstruction. But Rancière's differences from Derrida are as significant as their similarities—differences that are discernible in their respective

glosses on the myth of writing's origins that Plato recounts in the *Phaedrus*.²² Unlike Derrida, who sees in Plato's condemnation of writing a constitutive ambivalence that philosophy cannot govern, Rancière reads this rejection immediately in political terms as an allegory concerning "the poor":

This mute discourse, which knows neither its audience nor their needs, can transmit anything anywhere. It does not know to whom it is speaking, to whom it should speak, who can and cannot be admitted to a sharing [*partage*] of the *logos*. The living *logos* of the philosopher, the science of truth and lying, is also a science of speech and silence. It knows the right time for keeping quiet. Written discourse, on the other hand, is as incapable of keeping quiet as it is of speaking. Mute in the face of philosophers' questions, it cannot restrain itself from speaking to the uninitiated. The uncontrolled democracy of this discourse-at-liberty makes philosophy's fine titles and beautiful appearances sparkle before the eyes of our too-clever artisans. Its infirmity is bastardy. It puts the *logos* at the disposal of men whose work has damaged their bodies and mutilated their souls. (40)

Forgetting "to signal for which *habitus* it is suitable and for which it is not" (186), writing in the *Phaedrus* is thus the image of democracy in making itself "equally available both to those entitled to use it and those who are not."²³ Rancière later terms this structural capacity of writing "literarity" [*littérarité*]; in *The Philosopher and His Poor* it goes by the name "theatrocracy," the rule of the audience disdained by Plato as "the mother of democracy" (45).²⁴ No wonder Plato rejected theatrical mimesis and democracy in a single gesture: "The tragic illusion itself belonged to the democratic reign of appearance and flattery, in which the arbitrariness of the orator and that of the *demos* reflected each other interminably."²⁵ One of Rancière's achievements in this book is his way of regarding philosophical attempts to regulate mimesis as attempts to ground the division of labor—and vice versa. Plato, he shows, even tried to argue that "human nature is 'minted in such small coinage' that one can imitate only one thing at a time. Unfortunately, the new machines of the theater are there to belie his nice optimism. On the stage, before a public that is no longer one of warriors but of artisans, these machines tear to pieces his fine principle of the functionality of the division of labor in pro-

ducing the whole of creation” (10–11). Marx and Nietzsche, too, will discover in their different ways that “there is no escaping from the theater” (62–63, 121). In all such instances, what makes theater “dangerous” is just what enables the poor to do more than one thing at a time—the iterative miming of roles not one’s own. Which is why authorities are as interested in keeping audiences from mingling as they are in censoring what takes place on stage.²⁶

And the shoemaker? He is, surprisingly, *everywhere* in the history this book surveys. He is introduced in the Republic “whenever it becomes necessary to think about the division of labor” (4); he becomes “the generic name for the man who is not where he ought to be if the order of estates is to get on with the order of discourse” (48); he leads the way in the nineteenth century in the battle against the “glory” of work (59). Wagner’s Hans Sachs, of course, was a shoemaker. Karl Marx was once called a shoemaker, though he considered the shoemaker-poet a figure of Bad History (61, 68–69). “Ashaverus, the Wandering Jew, was a shoemaker.”²⁷ While omnipresent, the shoemaker is always where one least expects to find him. A random example—here is Gérard Genette dismissing in an extended huff “the ponderous tradition Schopenhauer calls ‘the metaphysics of the beautiful’ ”:

In this tradition, stretching from Novalis to Heidegger or Adorno, and, consequently, a bit beyond, I generally find nothing but unverifiable affirmations, rather heavily laced with the ideology of antimodernism, together with celebrations of art’s revolutionary subversiveness or exalted glorifications of its power to make ontological revelations. One can, perhaps, do art no greater disservice than to overestimate its role by counterposing it, in a way smacking of obscurantism, to that of science or technology, and by unwarrantedly assimilating its message to philosophy’s—even if the complementary and inverse complaints (which derive, negatively, from the same expectation, once it has been disappointed) about art’s inability to “make” anything at all “happen,” put right Auschwitz and Hiroshima, or make up for the death of a child seem to me a little naive and, all things considered, out of place—as if a cobbler were to apologize for being unable to bring about a solar eclipse.²⁸

As if the cobbler were not the very principle of being out of place.
As if his invocation as the sign of the ridiculous were not the

oldest philosophical trick. As if a shoemaker and the heavens could have nothing to do with each other. As if a defense of art's autonomy must unwittingly recall what Plato said about his "poor": "A work of art is an object . . . which draws us into, or invites us to have, an aesthetic experience—and *nothing else*."²⁹

THE PHILOSOPHER AND HIS POOR

Dirk Rembrantsz was a Dutch peasant, a native of the village of Nierop in the northernmost part of Holland bordering on Frisia. Practicing the shoemaker's trade in his birthplace barely provided him with the necessities of life. But he found a way to vanquish fate through his exceptional knowledge of mathematics, which he could not refrain from cultivating though often at the expense of his livelihood. The great name of M. Descartes, along with the meager satisfaction he gleaned from mathematics books that he read in the vernacular language, prompted him to leave his village and set off to consult the philosopher. Renown had pictured the latter to him as the most easily approachable person in the world, and the notion he had of a philosopher in seclusion hardly suggested that access would have to be under Swiss guard. But Rembrantsz was rebuffed as an impudent peasant by M. Descartes's attendants, who so informed the master of the house after they had sent him away. Two or three months later, Rembrantsz returned in the very same suit of clothes and asked to speak to M. Descartes with the air of someone determined to confer with him about important matters. His appearance did not help him win a better reception than the first time. When the attendants brought word to M. Descartes, they portrayed him as an importunate beggar who, in search of a handout, asked to speak to M. Descartes about philosophy and astrology. Not wishing to pursue the matter further, M. Descartes went along with the view of his attendants; he sent money out to Rembrantsz and had it

explained that this would excuse the philosopher from the trouble of having to speak to him. But poverty had not diminished Rembrantsz's dignity and he refused the liberality of our philosopher, saying that since his moment had not yet arrived he would go away for a time, but that he hoped a third visit would prove more expedient. This reply was reported to M. Descartes, who now regretted not having seen the peasant and ordered his people to inform him if the man returned.

A few months later, Rembrantsz came back for the third time. Making it known that he was the peasant whose eagerness to see M. Descartes had cost him already two fruitless trips, he finally received the satisfaction he had been seeking with such earnestness and perseverance. M. Descartes recognized his competence and merit on the spot, and wanted to repay him with interest for all his troubles. He was not satisfied in instructing him in all manner of difficult subjects and in imparting his Method to rectify reasoning. He also counted him as one of his friends: despite the lowliness of Rembrantsz's estate, M. Descartes did not regard him as beneath those of the first rank, and he assured Rembrantsz that his home and heart would be open to him at all hours.

Rembrantsz lived only five or six leagues from Egmont. From that time on he paid frequent visits to M. Descartes and became, thanks to him, one of the foremost astronomers of his century.

ADRIEN BAILLET, *Vie de Monsieur
Descartes* (1691)

A PERSONAL ITINERARY

I MIGHT AS WELL say it straightaway: this book forms part of an inquiry that will not end with its final period. Proceeding, by way of Marx's suspended revolution, from the Platonic philosopher-king to what reigns today as the sociological conception of the world, I will try to indicate here some of the milestones and retrace some of the paths I pursued in asking two or three questions that are, at once, very simple and very complicated. How are we to conceive of the relation between the order of thought and the social order—as harmony or as rupture? How do individuals get some idea in their heads that makes them either satisfied with their position or indignant about it? How are representations of self and other—which sustain hierarchy, consensus, or conflict—formed and transformed? For twenty years I have had occasion to pursue these questions in various sites and circumstances: a seminar on *Capital* called to an unexpected notoriety; a thesis on Feuerbach interrupted by the din of the street; some time spent circulating between university halls and factory doors; ten years of research in worker archives.

That certainly makes for a number of detours. And several times word got back to me that intentions so pure in principle and labors so laudable in their execution should be, nevertheless, in a bit more of a hurry to display the straight lines of their method and the *terra firma* of their results.

I must acknowledge that with respect to the questions I posed, I have been fortunate to encounter teachers of the highest repute, some rightly so. Unfortunately, a certain irresoluteness of character, fed by an excessive attention to minute discrepancies in detail, always kept me from finding the most promising theories confirmed in the examples that life or study offered me. To which undoubtedly was added a certain Christian sentimentality that made me judge as a bit simplistic and rather disdainful the way in which learned discourses assumed that the common run of mortals forged their vision of the world. To say nothing of the naïveté with which the defenders and historiographers of the people praise the sober simplicity of the ideas they ascribe to them.

And so I had to set out without a guide—without a thread, one master of the art said to me—on the territory of the historian. There the study of a single case, it seemed to me, would help to advance my research: the years 1830 to 1850 witnessed the flowering of utopian socialism and, at the same time, a wide range of working-class expression from ethereal poetry to combative pamphlets and doctrinal newspapers. I tried to learn if these two developments met up with each other, whether we could know what proletarian intellectuals gathered from this utopian flowering, what they were able to oppose to it from their own reserves, and what in this whole process affected thinking in such a way as to modify the order of things.¹ In the course of this research, my interest shifted. Behind the “positivist” question—what could a person think at such a moment in the history of discourses and in such a position within the order of society? —I had to recognize the more fundamental question: how can those whose business is not thinking assume the authority to think and thereby constitute themselves as thinking subjects? The tableau that offered itself to me in response was exemplary in this respect, for when proletarians, in granting themselves permission to think, invaded the territory of the literati, the literati answered evasively by celebrating work as the true culture of the poor and the future of the world, and by warning the representatives of that world of the dangers of developing a split personality.

That scene was to remind me of some earlier readings as well as more recent experiences. I had read previously without particular interest the texts in which Plato borrowed from artisans the paradigms of philosophy, and those in which he ordered these same artisans not to think about anything beyond their jobs. I was born in a century when homage to labor, proletarian consciousness, and the spirit of the people brought to unheard-of perfection the forms of authority and the discourses of servitude. Where I lived, to be sure, the former were more civil and the latter more modest. But I was familiar enough with such efforts to restore to a class its consciousness, and to the people its culture, to sense in them also the trope that can be counted among the master logics of modernity: exclusion by homage. (As I indicated, I had personal reasons for being sensitive to the issue.) Finally, Bourdieu’s *Distinction* struck me with its insistence on opposing proletarian *amor fati* to bourgeois culture games—on opposing, if you will, the undershirts that cling tightly to the bodies of workers to the too-large

ideas on which workers drift away when answering the questions of the experts [*des savants*].² And that book's criticism of philosophers as "deniers" of the social seemed to be in curious continuity with the exclusions of the philosophical tradition.

Between the ancient ruses of philosophy and the modern ruses of anti-philosophy, it appeared possible for me to trace a straight line. I would start from the logic used by Plato to make the philosopher a weaver, the better to consign shoemakers to the hell of non-philosophy, and I would arrive eventually at the reverence for popular virtues and the denunciation of ideological vanities that sustain equivocally the modern discourse of experts and leaders. Along the way, I would have to show only how Marx, in destroying the Platonic realm of the Ideas, may perhaps have prolonged what he said he was overturning, giving proletarians truth so as to exclude them more surely from the learned science reserved for experts. The task did not seem to be beyond my abilities.

I forgot that I had never known how to draw a straight line. And both Plato and Marx had more than one trick in store to ensure my failure once again. Plato forced me to notice that the sorry fate he reserved for artisans was also, precisely, the price to be paid for pursuing insistently a question that still has some importance for us: how can justice be established beyond all questions of technique and the hygiene of individual and social preservation? From the opposite angle, Marx's brutality toward the old moons of the philosophical firmament was purchased at the price of ever-recurring lacerations and paradoxes. I had to ask myself why Marx laid the blame not on Don Quixote the chimerical lover of justice, but on Sancho the realist; why his proletariat was so inconsistent and his bourgeoisie so quick to swoon; and whether his work had been made interminable simply by reasons of his own health or by a more fundamental question regarding the distance between revolutionary justice and social health.

A few added twists and turns, then, so that what began as a rather dispassionate inquiry into the image of the worker in scholarly discourse came to transform itself as it reopened all the venerable conflicts between philosophy and rhetoric, justice and health. The contemporary blindness of policies that take one of these for the other, and that identify sociology's framing of the question (and responses to it) with the advance of democracy, undoubtedly contributed to that change. The final section of this book may well have ended up, as a result, more lively than I had