I An Intellectual Adventure

In 1818, Joseph Jacotot, a lecturer in French literature at the University of Louvain, had an intellectual adventure.

A long and eventful career should have made him immune to surprises: he had celebrated his nineteenth birthday in 1789. He was at that time teaching rhetoric at Dijon and preparing for a career in law. In 1792, he served as an artilleryman in the Republican armies. Then, under the Convention, he worked successively as instructor for the Bureau of Gunpowder, secretary to the Minister of War, and substitute for the director of the Ecole Polytechnique. When he returned to Dijon, he taught analysis, ideology, ancient languages, pure mathematics, transcendent mathematics, and law. In March 1815, the esteem of his countrymen made him a deputy in spite of himself. The return of the Bourbons forced him into exile, and by the generosity of the King of the Netherlands he obtained a position as a professor at half-pay. Joseph Jacotot was acquainted with the laws of hospitality and counted on spending some calm days in Louvain.

Chance decided differently. The unassuming lecturer's lessons were, in fact, highly appreciated by his students. Among those who wanted to avail themselves of him were a good number of students who did not speak French; but Joseph Jacotot knew no Flemish. There was thus no language in which he could teach them what they sought from him. Yet he wanted to re-

spond to their wishes. To do so, the minimal link of a *thing in common* had to be established between himself and them. At that time, a bilingual edition of *Télémaque* was being published in Brussels.* The thing in common had been found, and Telemachus made his way into the life of Joseph Jacotot. He had the book delivered to the students and asked them, through an interpreter, to learn the French text with the help of the translation. When they had made it through the first half of the book, he had them repeat what they had learned over and over, and then told them to read through the rest of the book until they could recite it. This was a fortunate solution, but it was also, on a small scale, a philosophical experiment in the style of the ones performed during the Age of Enlightenment. And Joseph Jacotot, in 1818, remained a man of the preceding century.

But the experiment exceeded his expectations. He asked the students who had prepared as instructed to write in French what they thought about what they had read:

> He expected horrendous barbarisms, or maybe a complete inability to perform. How could these young people, deprived of explanation, understand and resolve the difficulties of a language entirely new to them? No matter! He had to find out where the route opened by chance had taken them, what had been the results of that desperate empiricism. And how surprised he was to discover that the students, left to themselves, managed this difficult step as well as many French could have done! Was wanting all that was necessary for doing? Were all men virtually capable of understanding what others had done and understood?[1]

Such was the revolution that this chance experiment unleashed in his mind. Until then, he had believed what all con-

*Fénelon's didactic and utopian 24-volume novel, *Télémaque* (1699), recounts the peregrinations of Telemachus, accompanied by his spiritual guide, Mentor, as he attempts to find his father, Odysseus. In it, Fénelon proposes an "Art of Reigning" and invents an ideal city, Salente, whose peace-loving citizens show exemplary civic virtue. The book was extremely displeasing to Louis XIV, who saw himself in the portrait of Idomeneus. But it was much admired by Enlightenment philosophers, who proclaimed Fénelon one of their most important precursors. In terms of Jacotot's adventure, the book could have been *Télémaque* or any other. —TRANS.

scientious professors believe: that the important business of the master is to transmit his knowledge to his students so as to bring them, by degrees, to his own level of expertise. Like all conscientious professors, he knew that teaching was not in the slightest about cramming students with knowledge and having them repeat it like parrots, but he knew equally well that students had to avoid the chance detours where minds still incapable of distinguishing the essential from the accessory, the principle from the consequence, get lost. In short, the essential act of the master was to *explicate*: to disengage the simple elements of learning, and to reconcile their simplicity in principle with the factual simplicity that characterizes young and ignorant minds. To teach was to transmit learning and form minds simultaneously, by leading those minds, according to an ordered progression, from the most simple to the most complex. By the reasoned appropriation of knowledge and the formation of judgment and taste, a student was thus elevated to as high a level as his social destination demanded, and he was in this way prepared to make the use of the knowledge appropriate to that destination: to teach, to litigate, or to govern for the lettered elite; to invent, design, or make instruments and machines for the new avant-garde now hopefully to be drawn from the elite of the common people; and, in the scientific careers, for the minds gifted with this particular genius, to make new discoveries. Undoubtedly the procedures of these men of science would diverge noticeably from the reasoned order of the pedagogues. But this was no grounds for an argument against that order. On the contrary, one must first acquire a solid and methodical foundation before the singularities of genius could take flight. *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc*.

This is how all conscientious professors reason. This was how Joseph Jacotot, in his thirty years at the job, had reasoned and acted. But now, by chance, a grain of sand had gotten into the machine. He had given no explanation to his "students" on the first elements of the language. He had not explained spelling or conjugations to them. They had looked for the French words that corresponded to words they knew and the reasons for their

grammatical endings by themselves. They had learned to put them together to make, in turn, French sentences by themselves: sentences whose spelling and grammar became more and more exact as they progressed through the book; but, above all, sentences of writers and not of schoolchildren. Were the schoolmaster's explications therefore superfluous? Or, if they weren't, to whom and for what were they useful?

The Explicative Order

Thus, in the mind of Joseph Jacotot, a sudden illumination brutally highlighted what is blindly taken for granted in any system of teaching: the necessity of explication. And yet why shouldn't it be taken for granted? No one truly knows anything other than what he has understood. And for comprehension to take place, one has to be given an explication, the words of the master must shatter the silence of the taught material.

And yet that logic is not without certain obscurities. Consider, for example, a book in the hands of a student. The book is made up of a series of reasonings designed to make a student understand some material. But now the schoolmaster opens his mouth to explain the book. He makes a series of reasonings in order to explain the series of reasonings that constitute the book. But why should the book need such help? Instead of paying for an explicator, couldn't a father simply give the book to his son and the child understand directly the reasonings of the book? And if he doesn't understand them, why would he be any more likely to understand the reasonings that would explain to him what he hasn't understood? Are those reasonings of a different nature? And if so, wouldn't it be necessary to explain the way in which to understand them?

So the logic of explication calls for the principle of a regression ad infinitum: there is no reason for the redoubling of reasonings ever to stop. What brings an end to the regression and gives the system its foundation is simply that the explicator is the sole judge of the point when the explication is itself explicated. He is the sole judge of that, in itself, dizzying question:

has the student understood the reasonings that teach him to understand the reasonings? This is what the master has over the father: how could the father be certain that the child has understood the book's reasonings? What is missing for the father, what will always be missing in the trio he forms with the child and the book, is the singular art of the explicator: the art of *distance*. The master's secret is to know how to recognize the distance between the taught material and the person being instructed, the distance also between learning and understanding. The explicator sets up and abolishes this distance—deploys it and reabsorbs it in the fullness of his speech.

This privileged status of speech does not suppress the regression ad infinitum without instituting a paradoxical hierarchy. In the explicative order, in fact, an oral explication is usually necessary to explicate the written explication. This presupposes that reasonings are clearer, are better imprinted on the mind of the student, when they are conveyed by the speech of the master, which dissipates in an instant, than when conveyed by the book, where they are inscribed forever in indelible characters. How can we understand this paradoxical privilege of speech over writing, of hearing over sight? What relationship thus exists between the power of speech and the power of the master?

This paradox immediately gives rise to another: the *words* the child learns best, those whose meaning he best fathoms, those he best makes his own through his own usage, are those he learns without a master explicator, well before any master explicator. According to the unequal returns of various intellectual apprenticeships, what all human children learn best is what no master can explain: the mother tongue. We speak to them and we speak around them. They hear and retain, imitate and repeat, make mistakes and correct themselves, succeed by chance and begin again methodically, and, at too young an age for explicators to begin instructing them, they are almost all—regardless of gender, social condition, and skin color—able to understand and speak the language of their parents.

And only now does this child who learned to speak through his own intelligence and through instructors who did not ex-

plain language to him—only now does his instruction, properly speaking, begin. Now everything happens as though he could no longer learn with the aid of the same intelligence he has used up until now, as though the autonomous relationship between apprenticeship and verification were, from this point on, alien to him. Between one and the other an opacity has now set in. It concerns *understanding*, and this word alone throws a veil over everything: understanding is what the child cannot do without the explanations of a master—later, of as many masters as there are materials to understand, all presented in a certain progressive order. Not to mention the strange circumstance that since the era of progress began, these explications have not ceased being perfected in order better to explicate, to make more comprehensible, the better to learn to learn—without any discernible corresponding perfection of the said comprehension. Instead, a growing complaint begins to be heard: the explicative system is losing effectiveness. This, of course, necessitates reworking the explications yet again to make them easier to understand by those who are failing to take them in.

The revelation that came to Joseph Jacotot amounts to this: the logic of the explicative system had to be overturned. Explication is not necessary to remedy an incapacity to understand. On the contrary, that very incapacity provides the structuring fiction of the explicative conception of the world. It is the explicator who needs the incapable and not the other way around; it is he who constitutes the incapable as such. To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself. Before being the act of the pedagogue, explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid. The explicator's special trick consists of this double inaugural gesture. On the one hand, he decrees the absolute beginning: it is only now that the act of learning will begin. On the other, having thrown a veil of ignorance over everything that is to be learned, he appoints himself to the task

of lifting it. Until he came along, the child has been groping blindly, figuring out riddles. Now he will learn. He heard words and repeated them. But now it is time to read, and he will not understand words if he doesn't understand syllables, and he won't understand syllables if he doesn't understand letters that neither the book nor his parents can make him understand—only the master's word. The pedagogical myth, we said, divides the world into two. More precisely, it divides intelligence into two. It says that there is an inferior intelligence and a superior one. The former registers perceptions by chance, retains them, interprets and repeats them empirically, within the closed circle of habit and need. This is the intelligence of the young child and the common man. The superior intelligence knows things by reason, proceeds by method, from the simple to the complex, from the part to the whole. It is this intelligence that allows the master to transmit his knowledge by adapting it to the intellectual capacities of the student and allows him to verify that the student has satisfactorily understood what he learned. Such is the principle of explication. From this point on, for Jacotot, such will be the principle of *enforced stultification.**

To understand this we must rid ourselves of received images. The stultifier is not an aged obtuse master who crams his students' skulls full of poorly digested knowledge, or a malignant character mouthing half-truths in order to shore up his power and the social order. On the contrary, he is all the more efficacious because he is knowledgeable, enlightened, and of good faith. The more he knows, the more evident to him is the distance between his knowledge and the ignorance of the ignorant ones. The more he is enlightened, the more evident he finds the difference between groping blindly and searching methodically, the more he will insist on substituting the spirit for the letter, the clarity of explications for the authority of the book. Above

*In the absence of a precise English equivalent for the French term *abrutir* (to render stupid, to treat like a brute), I've translated it as "stultify." Stultify carries the connotations of numbing and deadening better than the word "stupefy," which implies a sense of wonderment or amazement absent in the French.—TRANS.

all, he will say, the student must understand, and for that we must explain even better. Such is the concern of the enlightened pedagogue: does the little one understand? He doesn't understand. I will find new ways to explain it to him, ways more rigorous in principle, more attractive in form—and I will verify that he has understood.

A noble concern. Unfortunately, it is just this little word, this slogan of the enlightened—understand—that causes all the trouble. It is this word that brings a halt to the movement of reason, that destroys its confidence in itself, that distracts it by breaking the world of intelligence into two, by installing the division between the groping animal and the learned little man, between common sense and science. From the moment this slogan of duality is pronounced, all the perfecting of the ways of *making understood*, that great preoccupation of men of methods and progressives, is progress toward stultification. The child who recites under the threat of the rod obeys the rod and that's all: he will apply his intelligence to something else. But the child who is *explained to* will devote his intelligence to the work of grieving: to understanding, that is to say, to understanding that he doesn't understand unless he is explained to. He is no longer submitting to the rod, but rather to a hierarchical world of intelligence. For the rest, like the other child, he doesn't have to worry: if the solution to the problem is too difficult to pursue, he will have enough intelligence to open his eyes wide. The master is vigilant and patient. He will see that the child isn't following him; he will put him back on track by explaining things again. And thus the child acquires a new intelligence, that of the master's explications. Later he can be an explicator in turn. He possesses the equipment. But he will perfect it: he will be a man of progress.

Chance and Will

So goes the world of the explicated explicators. So would it have gone for Professor Jacotot if chance hadn't put him in the

presence of a *fact*. And Joseph Jacotot believed that all reasoning should be based on facts and cede place to them. We shouldn't conclude from this that he was a materialist. On the contrary, like Descartes, who proved movement by walking, but also like his very royalist and very religious contemporary Maine de Biran, he considered the fact of a mind at work, acting and conscious of its activity, to be more certain than any material thing. And this was what it was all about: *the fact was* that his students *had learned* to speak and to write in French without the aid of explication. He had communicated nothing to them about his science, no explications of the roots and flexions of the French language. He hadn't even proceeded in the fashion of those reformer pedagogues who, like the preceptor in Rousseau's *Emile*, mislead their students the better to guide them, and who cunningly erect an obstacle course for the students to learn to negotiate themselves. He had left them alone with the text by Fénelon, a translation—not even interlinear like a schoolbook—and their will to learn French. He had only given them the order to pass through a forest whose openings and clearings he himself had not discovered. Necessity had constrained him to leave his intelligence entirely out of the picture—that mediating intelligence of the master that relays the printed intelligence of written words to the apprentice's. And, in one fell swoop, he had suppressed the imaginary distance that is the principle of pedagogical stultification. Everything had perforce been played out between the intelligence of Fénelon who had wanted to make a particular use of the French language, the intelligence of the translator who had wanted to give a Flemish equivalent, and the intelligence of the apprentices who wanted to learn French. And it had appeared that no other intelligence was necessary. Without thinking about it, he had made them discover this thing that he discovered with them: that all sentences, and consequently all the intelligences that produce them, are of the same nature. Understanding is never more than translating, that is, giving the equivalent of a text, but in no way its reason. There is nothing behind the written

page, no false bottom that necessitates the work of an *other* intelligence, that of the explicator; no language of the master, no language of the language whose words and sentences are able to speak the reason of the words and sentences of a text. The Flemish students had furnished the proof: to speak about *Télémaque* they had at their disposition only the words of *Télémaque*. Fénelon's sentences alone are necessary to understand Fénelon's sentences and to express what one has understood about them. Learning and understanding are two ways of expressing the same act of translation. There is nothing beyond texts except the will to express, that is, to translate. If they had understood the language by learning Fénelon, it wasn't simply through the gymnastics of comparing the page on the left with the page on the right. It isn't the aptitude for changing columns that counts, but rather the capacity to say what one thinks in the words of others. If they had learned this from Fénelon, that was because the act of Fénelon the writer was itself one of translation: in order to translate a political lesson into a legendary narrative, Fénelon transformed into the French of his century Homer's Greek, Vergil's Latin, and the language, wise or naïve, of a hundred other texts, from children's stories to erudite history. He had applied to this double translation the same intelligence they employed in their turn to recount with the sentences of his book what they thought about his book.

But the intelligence that had allowed them to learn the French in *Télémaque* was the same they had used to learn their mother tongue: by observing and retaining, repeating and verifying, by relating what they were trying to know to what they already knew, by doing and reflecting about what they had done. They moved along in a manner one shouldn't move along—the way children move, blindly, figuring out riddles. And the question then became: wasn't it necessary to overturn the admissible order of intellectual values? Wasn't that shameful method of the riddle the true movement of human intelligence taking possession of its own power? Didn't its proscrip-

tion indicate above all the will to divide the world of intelligence into two? The advocates of method oppose the nonmethod of chance to that of proceeding by reason. But what they want to prove is given in advance. They suppose a little animal who, bumping into things, explores a world that he isn't yet able to see and will only discern when they teach him to do so. But the human child is first of all a speaking being. The child who repeats the words he hears and the Flemish student "lost" in his *Télémaque* are not proceeding hit or miss. All their effort, all their exploration, is strained toward this: someone has addressed words to them that they want to recognize and respond to, not as students or as learned men, but as people; in the way you respond to someone speaking to you and not to someone examining you: under the sign of equality.

The fact was there: they had learned by themselves, without a master explicator. What has happened once is thenceforth always possible. This discovery could, after all, overturn the principles of the *professor* Jacotot. But Jacotot the man was in a better position to recognize what great variety can be expected from a human being. His father had been a butcher before keeping the accounts of his grandfather, the carpenter who had sent his grandson to college. He himself had been a professor of rhetoric when he had answered the call to arms in 1792. His companions' vote had made him an artillery captain, and he had showed himself to be a remarkable artilleryman. In 1793, at the Bureau of Powders, this Latinist became a chemistry instructor working toward the accelerated forming of workers being sent everywhere in the territory to apply Fourcroy's discoveries. At Fourcroy's own establishment, he had become acquainted with Vauquelin, the peasant's son who had trained himself to be a chemist without the knowledge of his boss. He had seen young people arrive at the Ecole Polytechnique who had been selected by improvised commissions on the dual basis of their liveliness of mind and their patriotism. And he had seen them become very good mathematicians, less through the calculations Monge

and Lagrange explained to them than through those that they performed in front of them.* He himself had apparently profited from his administrative functions by gaining competence as a mathematician—a competence he had exercised later at the University of Dijon. Similarly, he had added Hebrew to the ancient languages he taught, and composed an *Essay on Hebrew Grammar*. He believed, God knows why, that that language had a future. And finally, he had gained for himself, reluctantly but with the greatest firmness, a competence at being a representative of the people. In short, he knew what the will of individuals and the peril of the country could engender in the way of unknown capacities, in circumstances where urgency demanded destroying the stages of explicative progression. He thought that this exceptional state, dictated by the nation's need, was no different in principle from the urgency that dictates the exploration of the world by the child or from that other urgency that constrains the singular path of learned men and inventors. Through the experiment of the child, the learned man, and the revolutionary, the method of *chance* so successfully practiced by the Flemish students revealed its second secret. The method of equality was above all a method of the will. One could learn by oneself and without a master explicator when one wanted to, propelled by one's own desire or by the constraint of the situation.

The Emancipatory Master

In this case, that constraint had taken the form of the command Jacotot had given. And it resulted in an important consequence, no longer for the students but for the master. The students had learned without a master explicator, but not, for all that, without a master. They didn't know how before, and

*Antoine François Fourcroy (1755–1809), chemist and politician, participated in the establishment of a rational nomenclature in chemistry. The principal work of the mathematician Joseph Louis de Lagrange (1736–1813) was the *Mécanique analytique* (1788). The mathematician Gaspard Monge (1746–1818) helped create the Ecole Normale and founded the Ecole Polytechnique.—TRANS.