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Edward Hughes, *Egalitarian Strangeness: On Class Disturbance and Levelling in Modern and Contemporary French Narrative*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. xii + 330 pp. Bibliography, index. £95.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 978-1-800-34842-4; £95.00 U.K. (eb). ISBN 978-1-800-34548-5.

Review by Kevin Inston, University College London.

Edward Hughes frames his groundbreaking and highly erudite discussion of modern and contemporary French literature with the term "egalitarian strangeness" (p. 12) which he directly borrows from Jacques Rancière's *Courts Voyages au Pays du Peuple*.[1] Egalitarian strangeness is an aesthetic and ethico-political practice that disturbs the seemingly naturalised order of social inequality by confronting it with the equality on which it depends. For any social order to function smoothly, it requires, Rancière argues, the equality of intelligence or, in other words, that its members understand their place and act accordingly. This strange equality of understanding between superiors and inferiors can appear at any moment or in any setting to expose the wrong of the distribution of roles, entitlements, or rights that that order prescribes. It is this practice that Hughes finds at work in historically, generically, and stylistically diverse texts by an impressive range of authors (Thierry Beinstingel, François Bon, Gabriel Gauny, Didier Eribon, Pierre Michon, Marie Ndiaye, Paul Nizan, Charles Péguy, Marcel Proust, Claude Simon, Simone Weil) which attests to Hughes's mastery of French literature.

Equality, for Rancière, involves making the invisible and the inaudible sensible in ways that disrupt habitual patterns of perception or action. Art therefore intervenes politically, not through socio-political instruction or demystification, but through its ability to create new relations between words, the worlds that they configure, and the capacities of the people that inhabit them. This redistribution of the sensible is akin to the one enacted by Rancierian politics whereby the "unequal" stage a world in which they make themselves count politically by speaking and acting in ways that reject their subordination. Hughes analyses the egalitarian strangeness of the textual worlds he has selected but also practises it in his sensitive, patient, and highly nuanced readings. Those readings establish novel relations, shared worlds, and common methods of equality between the texts while remaining alert to their differences and tensions. In this spirit, he also refuses to subordinate the literary works to Rancière's theory, allowing those works to converse with it in ways that confirm Hughes's skill as a scholar of both literature and critical theory.

Hughes's egalitarian reading practices, his refusal to operate within predefined and hierarchical classifications, brings the central aim of his book alive. That aim is to explore how literature can "imagine worlds in which class borders might be weakened or occluded" (p. 3). Central to this

goal is to erode the division between manual and intellectual work on which class distinctions rest, which defines literature as a *purely* bourgeois aesthetic pursuit. Hughes selects texts where that division is undermined or problematised. For example, he reads the nineteenth-century worker-philosopher Gauny, retrieved from historical obscurity by Rancière's early writings, alongside more canonical figures such as Simon and Proust. Gauny, by writing poetic and philosophical texts, refused to live within the sensory regime of his time that identified manual workers with labour as their natural or revolutionary identity. While Gauny redistributes the sensible by adopting activities that his profession as a joiner *should* exclude, in texts by Péguy, Beinstingel, and Ndiaye, we see how (self)-knowledge emerges through manual work. This blurring of the manual and the intellectual is continued in Weil's journal of her life on the production line which reveals the dehumanising effects of specialisation and mechanisation, and in Proust's democratising depiction of "handlers of words" (p. 17) of all social strata. Hughes's analysis of egalitarian strangeness not only disrupts categories which seek to naturalise inequality or fix points of class antagonism or difference, but also any hierarchical, chronological, or identarian classifications of the texts and their authors. Hughes stages a dialogue among equals about the enduring regime of inequality and its determination of which voices, identities, and practices matter. His own text performs the equality it studies.

Class disturbance and levelling, Hughes shows, occur in subtle and unconventional ways that highlight the reverberations of equality in the everyday of social orders. For example, the eponymous protagonist of Ndiaye's *La Cheffe* creates a space free from class alienation with her nocturnal culinary experiments; she performs a solitary form of self-emancipation that "transcends and, yet also reconstructs, the strictures imposed by class habitus" (p. 90). In Proust, quotidian verbal exchanges provide opportunity for social dissensus, for skilful redistributions of power and prestige by "lowly" word handlers. These moments reveal the contingency of the hierarchies that decide ways of speaking and doing, that classify and order people; they affirm their susceptibility to disturbance from the equality that they constantly have to suppress.

However, what remains less clear are the effects of these class disturbances. The redistributions appear, at times, so subtle, so entwined with the everyday, that they could pass unnoticed and leave the dominant order unscathed. Hughes is indeed awake to this question and to what remains a recurrent critique of Rancierian politics. Rather than promoting collective emancipation or the realisation of common goals, the texts mostly reveal the capacity of "ordinary" subjects to find in unequal worlds methods of equality that outstrip or pause the constant play of defiance and domination, resistance and counter-resistance. Hughes's *Egalitarian Strangeness*, via the work of Rancière, situates the politics of literature not in its content, but in its demonstration of this capacity to reconfigure sensory regimes, to make spaces, things, actions count in new ways. The texts come together to assert, in varying degrees, the right of anyone and everyone to decide how they live and the equality of intelligence which that right presupposes.

Notwithstanding this affirmative dimension, Hughes's tales of class disturbance and levelling prove more attentive than Rancière's egalitarian politics to the difficult lived experience of inequality, to the frictions, alienation, and conflicts of living outside class systems, to the investment in identities, habits, and distinctions that enable the reproduction of unequal social orders. In this way, Hughes tests out Rancière's theory of literature across different texts to disclose its critical force and potential limitations. *Egalitarian Strangeness* represents a major contribution to French Studies, offering original takes on canonical and non-canonical works and on the questions of social class, equality, and political art.

NOTE

[1] Jacques Rancière, *Courts Voyages au Pays du Peuple* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

Kevin Inston
University College London
k.inston@ucl.ac.uk

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