

# **Wild Normativity: Lyotard's Search for an Ethical Antihumanism**

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## **Abstract**

In spite of its thematic and stylistic heterogeneity, Jean-François Lyotard's corpus may be plausibly interpreted as, by and large, an attempt to grapple with the following problem set: a) In general: if we reject all transcendent/systematic philosophical frameworks, can we consistently make normative claims? Can we ground them in any way? Do we need to? b) In particular: if we reject the philosophical framework of humanism, what does this mean for ethics and/or politics? Can one be an antihumanist without abandoning ethics? The basic issue is over the titular possibility of a "wild normativity" – that is, a normativity that does not derive its force from any kind of transcendent guarantor. As I reconstruct him, Lyotard begins from a methodological rejection of transcendent guarantors in general; this plays itself out in particular terms as a rejection of humanism. Thus, beginning from a thought not of universality and totality but of singularity and difference, and wishing at a certain point in his career to ensure that the problem of justice stays firmly on the agenda, Lyotard gives us to think the very possibility of an ethical antihumanism. My dissertation is both an interpretation of Lyotard's work as it unfolds in time, as well as a contribution to thinking through the general-particular problem set that I argue is at play in his work.

## **Note on Sources and Citations**

With few exceptions, Lyotard wrote and published his works in French. For the benefit of my Anglophone readers, I have cited English translations of Lyotard's works whenever these are available. In cases where no translation is available, or where I have been unable to reference one, I have made my own humble translations of cited passages. For readers wishing to check the original French sources, citations of English editions are followed by square brackets containing the relevant page numbers.

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Gold-flecked with birdsong,  
her laughter. Forever, tell  
how she sharpens me

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## Introduction:

...the expression *Can we?* not only connotes possibility, it implies capacity as well: is it in our power, our strength, and our competence to perpetuate the project of modernity? The question suggests that to be sustained, such a project would call for strength and competence, and that these things may have failed us. Such a reading would have to spark an inquiry, an inquiry into the failing of the modern subject. And if this failing should be a matter for dispute, then we must be able to produce evidence for it in the form of facts or at least signs. The interpretation of this evidence may well engender controversy, and at the very least it must be submitted to cognitive procedures for establishing facts or speculative procedures for validating signs. (I am referring, without further explanation, to the Kantian problematic of hypotyposes that plays a major role in his historicopolitical philosophy.)

Without wishing to decide here and now whether it is constituted by facts or signs, the evidence we can collect on this failing of the modern subject seems difficult to refute. In the course of the past fifty years, each grand narrative of emancipation – regardless of the genre it privileges – has, as it were, had its principle invalidated. *All that is real is rational, all that is rational is real*: “Auschwitz” refutes the speculative doctrine. At least this crime, which is real, is not rational. *All that is proletarian is communist, all that is communist is proletarian*: “Berlin 1953,” “Budapest 1956,” “Czechoslovakia 1968,” “Poland 1980,” (to name but a few) refute the doctrine of historical materialism: the workers rise up against the Party. *All that is democratic is by the people and for the people, and vice versa*: “May 1968” refutes the doctrine of parliamentary liberalism. Everyday society brings the representative institution to a halt. *Everything that promotes the free flow of supply and demand is good for general prosperity, and vice versa*: the “crises of 1911 and 1929” refute the doctrine of economic liberalism, and the “crisis of 1974-79” refutes the post-Keynesian modification of that doctrine.

The investigator records the names of these events as so many signs of the failing of modernity.

- Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*

Jean-François Lyotard’s generation of French philosophers occupies an important moment in the history of Western thought. In a context where intellectual engagement with the intimately linked problems of revolution, universality and particularity/community constituted something of a national tradition,<sup>1</sup> their task was to

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Sunil Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution: The Intellectual Left in Postwar France* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1993). Vincent Descombes also identifies, via Lyotard, the defining tension of post-revolutionary France: its political tradition is torn “entre un universalisme de principe et un

think through an incomparable trauma: what appeared, at least, to have been the abject failures of the various Enlightenment projects of human emancipation and development.

By the 1960s the balance sheet of modernity was not good. Despite palpable gains in standard of living, “benevolent” technologies and public health in much of the global north, the promise of modernity had also yielded imperialist wars, Nazism, Stalinism, ongoing colonialisms and neocolonialisms, the Cold War, nuclear weapons, genocides, environmental devastation, erratic and predatory capitalism, not to mention the pervasive and worsening malaise, depression, neurosis and psychosis characteristic of liberal democracies. To many of Lyotard’s generation, the highly efficient, orderly and mechanized production of corpses at Auschwitz alone appeared to have indexed the fundamental irrationality of modern reason.

It was in this context of an apparent dialectical reversal of Enlightenment goals and values<sup>2</sup> that a bloc of the French intellectual Left of Lyotard’s generation took on a twofold, seemingly paradoxical task: on an immediate level, theorizing revolution without bureaucracy and, at a more fundamental level, without a subject, class or community; more abstractly, and much more radically still, sketching a thought resistant to universality as such. In short, as *postmodern* revolutionaries their task was to radically critique and go beyond the Enlightenment models, categories, and concepts that had so miserably failed. The 1960s and 70s especially saw an efflorescence of French philosophical attempts to establish a truly “wild” and anti-modern thinking as well as a commensurate revolutionary position and practice.<sup>3</sup>

As Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut persuasively argue, a salient feature of this French intellectual moment, which they dub “la pensée ’68”,<sup>4</sup> was its “resolute” rejection of

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particularisme de fait.” (“between a universalism of principle and a particularism of fact”) (*Philosophie par gros temps*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1989, p.137.)

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009). The latter is arguably a foundational text for Lyotard’s generation of French philosophers. Descombes underlines the link between Lyotard’s conception of postmodernity and the critical theory of the Frankfurt school, claiming that they share “les défauts de toutes les théories qu’organise le manichéisme logique de la raison et de son Autre” (“the faults of all theories which set up a logical manicheanism of reason and its Other”) (*Philosophie par gros temps*, p.136-137.).

<sup>3</sup> An excellent primer on this philosophical moment is Peter Dews’s *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London and New York, Verso, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> Ferry and Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties* (Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1990), p.xvii-xix: “a constellation of works which are in chronological proximity to May or, even more precisely, to works whose authors acknowledged, usually explicitly, a kinship of inspiration with the

humanism.<sup>5</sup> In broad brushstrokes, the antihumanism of Lyotard's intellectual cohort was a function of the "massive, brutal and unsubtle identification it [made] between the *philosophy of subjectivity* and *metaphysics*"<sup>6</sup> – that is, very roughly, between one aspect of humanism in particular and universalistic/transcendent/determinate thinking in general. "It goes without saying", Ferry and Renault claim,

that the opposition of '68 philosophy to humanism never meant that it intended to defend barbarianism and plead for the inhuman. In fact, it is because of the supposedly catastrophic effects (for whom if not for man?) of modern humanism that it must have appeared to be the enemy of philosophy. Without going into the analysis of specific modalities of this antihumanism ... it has to be pointed out, in order to understand the reason, that it was always based on a line of argumentation according to which the humanism of modern philosophy, although apparently the liberator and defender of human dignity, actually succeeded only in becoming its opposite: the accomplice, if not the cause, of oppression ... On the horizon of humanism, proliferating each time according to specific logic, is the barbarism, already denounced by Heidegger, of an epoch when "deserts spread, devastated by technology" (or, in another register, by "instrumental reason"), subjugated to the total domination of the "Führer" in control of every district of the social space. And as a result, since the real barbarians are not who one thinks they are, how can one not be resolutely antihumanist?<sup>7</sup>

It was, Ferry and Renault maintain, the "simplistic identification" of the philosophy of subjectivity and metaphysics which "led '68 philosophy into committing itself to the very costly (perhaps ruinous) antihumanist route".<sup>8</sup> But what exactly are "humanism" and "antihumanism"? Why, moreover, is antihumanism so "costly", to the point of being "ruinous" even?

"Humanism" is a historically rich and variegated concept,<sup>9</sup> but for my purposes it denotes any and all systems of thought and discourse wherein a universal concept of the human as species and/or as subject, i.e. the human as such, forms the conceptual and ethical centre of the universe and/or history.<sup>10</sup> "Antihumanism", naturally, denotes on this reading a philosophical discourse or position which would reject any such universal

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movement ... These publications and the revolt in May may have belonged to the same cultural phenomenon and may have indeed constituted it in different modes, like symptoms."

<sup>5</sup> Ferry and Renault, *French Philosophy of the Sixties*, p.xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxv/xxvi.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>9</sup> A good primer: *Humanism* by Tony Davies (New York, Routledge, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> In the language of Kant, which we will explore below: "the Human" as Concept of the understanding, or as Idea of reason, where the latter represents a totality to be achieved.

claims, aims and pretensions of humanism. In rejecting the universal (“metaphysics”), the philosophical movement to which Lyotard belonged also rejected appeals to any and all versions of a universal humanity or ideal human subject (“the philosophy of subjectivity”).

Bracketing Ferry and Renault’s claim that the antihumanism of *la pensée* ’68 (more specifically, its radical critique of the subject) was “theoretically untenable”<sup>11</sup> at least three *prima facie* plausible reasons can be sketched to account for why it may be considered a costly or even a ruinous route. For one thing, as Ferry and Renault point out, “simple common sense should be enough to demonstrate”<sup>12</sup> the practically absurd – I would say, more charitably, counterintuitive – consequences that taking the antihumanist route engenders:

Is it reasonable to believe, as Althusser unfortunately invites us to do, that the millions of victims of Stalinism paid with their lives so that petit-bourgeois humanism could survive within a Marxism that was still ideologized by the leaders of the Soviet Union? Is it really because he was still too “humanistic” that Stalin unleashed the “great purge” of 1936-38? And, in another chapter, who can believe that it was because Heidegger had not yet sufficiently deconstructed humanism by 1933 that he was capable of joining the Nazi party and pronouncing, along with many others, a Profession of Faith in Hitler of University Professors?<sup>13</sup>

Certainly, the rejection of humanism on the grounds that it is a *sufficient* condition for unheard of abuses of human dignity would be a stretch. Ferry and Renault risk creating something of a straw man here; it is more charitable, in my view, to take Lyotard’s cohort of French philosophers as suggesting that humanism was a *necessary* condition for such phenomena as Stalinism and Heidegger’s Nazism. Nonetheless, the point stands that such claims of French antihumanism are *prima facie* counterintuitive and are not for the most part rigorously argued.

Secondly, politically speaking the antihumanism of Lyotard and his fellow-travellers put them in the curious position of a Leftist vanguard without – moreover, apparently resistant to – any kind of popular base. By and large they rejected appeals not only to the working class, but to any ideal political subject whatsoever, be the latter as

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<sup>11</sup> Ferry and Renault, *French Philosophy of the Sixties*, p.xxvii.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

vague as “the masses”<sup>14</sup> or humankind itself. This created the impression either of incoherence, or of political cynicism, or both: that is, either Lyotard’s cohort was committing a performative absurdity (i.e. calling for, agitating for a subjectless revolution), or they were simply disdainful of “the masses” and pushed ahead with their political program regardless; or finally, and this would appear to be even worse, it is possible that they pushed ahead with an incoherent program in cynical fashion.

Thirdly, and the bulk of my interest lies here, there is a more fundamental normative problem generated by the French antihumanism of the 60s and 70s. The previous point about politics already underscores that the abandonment of universalistic thinking and the philosophy of subjectivity by Lyotard’s cohort seems to have left a normative vacuum. Ethically, as we will see, the rejection of humanism leaves hanging the question of to whom and on what grounds justice should be done. At the very least, ethics would seem to imply moral agents and moral patients. Assuming a radical critique of the subject, it is therefore unclear *prima facie* how an antihumanist philosophy could coherently claim to have an ethics.

By the late 1970s the wave of Lyotard’s generation had crested in France. Faced with the apparent ethical and political sterility of French antihumanism, as well as its perceived ties to the logic of totalitarianism, many on the far intellectual Left simply jumped ship, taking up modern, neo-humanistic positions. Those like Lyotard, who remained in the orbit of a staunch antihumanism until his death in 1998,<sup>15</sup> became increasingly marginal figures in France despite their considerable successes on the world and especially Anglo-American stages.<sup>16</sup> As Julian Bourg demonstrates,<sup>17</sup> even those who remained in the orbit of French antihumanism would go on to wrestle mightily with the problem of ethics – Lyotard included.

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<sup>14</sup> Though now also staunchly antihumanist, Lyotard’s contemporary Alain Badiou belonged at the time to the Maoist current of French intellectual Leftism, and therefore championed a mass line. This should underscore that the positions of individual antihumanist French philosophers were variegated and constantly changing. Badiou comments briefly on Lyotard’s disdain for mass politics in *Pocket Pantheon*, London and New York, Verso, 2009, p.108-109.

<sup>15</sup> As some commentators detect a resurgent humanism in Lyotard’s later writings, part of my argument in Chapter 3 will be to show that while somewhat understandable, this impression is mistaken.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2008) for a thorough account of how and why thinkers like Lyotard have enjoyed an American renaissance.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal & Kingston, London, and Ithaca, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).

While the full story of France's antihumanist moment is arguably still to be written – witness the continued outpouring of publications on French antihumanist philosophers, as well as Alain Badiou's astounding and ongoing international success – many have chalked up la pensée '68 to a historical symptom of little philosophical value.<sup>18</sup> As demonstrated by Ferry and Renault's comments on the "disastrous effects"<sup>19</sup> of French antihumanism, many have even gone so far as to see in it something highly and essentially pernicious. Antihumanism, after all, implies a rejection of human rights discourse. In the current conjuncture, where human rights claims serve as trumps even for those who consistently violate them, antihumanism's rejection of human rights discourse alone would appear to be both decisive and damning.

The overall impression is one of failure. Failures, however, can be highly instructive. The intellectual effort of Lyotard's cohort was by and large extremely rigorous and in some ways fecund, despite what appears to have been its fundamental untenability. Impasses must at any rate be tested before we can call them impasses. And sometimes the testing itself produces much that is useful.

Turning more specifically to Lyotard, we can certainly say that if his thought was strikingly original in certain respects, in a weak sense, at least, it was also a product of its time. But pointing to the historical genesis of a work of thinking does not absolve us of the task of confronting it and working through its particulars. The fact that philosophy is at least weakly generated by its context, that it is symptomatic in certain respects, does not render its contents null and void, or empty of import with the capacity to speak across historical time. If that were the case, there would be an unbridgeable chasm between philosophy and its history. Rather, we can say that situated in his particular moment, Lyotard wrestled with a problem set of universal import. Emerging at a moment when the rejection of universality in general and humanism in particular was on the agenda, Lyotard gives to thinking the task of examining whether or not it may posit normativity outside of the transcendent in general, and the human as such in particular.

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<sup>18</sup> Ferry and Renault, for their part, concede that "French philosophy of the '68 period had the value (if it only had one, this would be it) that it brought into focus the questioning of the metaphysical foundations of *traditional naïve humanism*, if only to the extent that Heidegger's deconstruction of modernity is often its determining component. If today, in view of the aporias and disastrous effects of antihumanism, returning its rights to a philosophy of man as such is an issue, this influence of the sixties, at least, must not be lost" (Ferry and Renault, *French Philosophy of the Sixties*, p.xxviii.).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

In fact, I argue that much of Lyotard's life's work may be plausibly interpreted as just such an engagement, divided for heuristic purposes into general and particular components:

- a) In general: if we reject all transcendent/systematic philosophical frameworks, can we consistently make normative claims? Can we ground them in any way? Do we need to?
- b) In particular: if we reject the philosophical framework of humanism, what does this mean for ethics and/or politics? Can one be an antihumanist without abandoning ethics?

The basic issue is over the titular possibility of a “wild normativity” – that is, a normativity that does not derive its force from any kind of transcendent guarantor. As I reconstruct him, Lyotard begins from a methodological rejection of transcendent guarantors in general; this plays itself out in particular terms as a rejection of humanism. Thus, beginning from a thought not of universality and totality but of singularity and difference, and wishing at a certain point in his career to ensure that the problem of justice stays firmly on the agenda, Lyotard gives us to think the very possibility of an ethical antihumanism.

The following dissertation comprises a critical reconstruction of how Lyotard's engagement with this problem-set unfolded, followed by a critical assessment of his philosophical and political legacies. Chapter 1 covers the early Lyotard through to the “libidinal” writings and the ethical aporia of *Économie libidinale*. Chapter 2 tracks his attempt to formulate an ethical antihumanism during his subsequent “pagan/postmodern” phase. Chapter 3 explains how, faced with an apparently insoluble methodological problem surrounding normativity, Lyotard shifted to an additive strategy in his later works and began to produce something approaching evidence for the normative claims he could not consistently make (i.e. “showing” what he could not consistently say). Chapter 4 comprises a summing up and a critical assessment of his life's work in terms of its relative philosophical and political successes and failures. This will set the stage for my conclusion, which is a brief statement about that in Lyotard which, given his frustrating and frustrated engagements with the problem of formulating an ethical antihumanism, is of enduring value. If I am right, Lyotard grappled with the aforementioned problem set

for decades and produced much that is philosophically interesting in the process. My conclusion will reflect my belief that, judged by the criteria of rational/cognitive discourse, he ultimately foundered on the incoherence and/or arbitrariness of his methodology. In his very attempt, however, he does much to suggest that there is something which escapes the grasp of rational/cognitive discourse. As I will also explain, Lyotard retains an enduring relevance for philosophy and philosophical pedagogy.

Though each chapter will begin with a discussion of the particular methodological choices which I make therein, in making my overall argument I will employ two methods. Since I reconstruct Lyotard's thought as a developing engagement with the aforementioned problem set, on the one hand I will employ an exegetical/hermeneutical method; that is, through textual explication I will produce a plausible, more or less globalizing interpretation of the various argumentative moves made by him in the course of his philosophical career. Since, however, I wish also to evaluate these moves both as they happen as well as in terms of the general picture to which they contribute, on the other hand I will employ a critical method throughout. The two methods are logically separate, but in practice they are often intertwined. Thus, although the first three chapters are essentially exegetical, each contains an undercurrent of critical commentary. This is largely by way of demonstrating to the reader along the way what is problematic in Lyotard as well as how and why, when it comes to the critical assessment of Chapter 4, a more or less global criticism of his philosophical contributions can and should be made.

My hope in advancing this hermeneutical/critical thesis is to make at least two significant and original contributions to philosophical research. On the one hand, the following is offered as a piece of scholarship on the history of French philosophy. Though Cusset, Bourg, Descombes, Badiou, Ferry/Renaut and others have already provided very rich (if usually polemical) accounts of the '68 generation of French philosophers and their eventual ethical turn, there is still precision-work to be done on the contributions of individual '68 philosophers. Though there are a number of good introductory texts on Lyotard, my own will be more historically grounded than most; to my knowledge it will also be the first which privileges the general-particular ethical problem set I have laid out in its interpretation. I would be happy to have my contribution considered as part of the more general project of coming to terms with the French turn

from revolution to ethics, as Bourdieu identifies it, by focusing in on some of the actual philosophical arguments that were at issue.

On the other hand, I hope to contribute by means of the following to reflection upon the aforementioned general-particular ethical problem set itself. Lyotard's attempt to think ethics outside of transcendent guarantors may have been counterintuitive at face value, but for all that it was rigorous and in certain respects highly original. As I will explain in Chapter 4, his philosophical avant-gardism cannot be dismissed out of hand, even if, on the balance, it may lead to something of a methodological cul-de-sac. Ultimately he was thinking through problems of universal import, and as mentioned already, the impasses he tested may be highly instructive for philosophical thinking in general.

This having been said, I invite the reader to consider a philosopher whose very failures, I believe, were successes of the human spirit.

## Chapter 1:

### Toward an Antihumanist Philosophy (and an Ethical Aporia)

Where anything that is has become the object of representing, it first incurs in a certain manner a loss of Being.

- Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology"

...we would-be novelists have a reach as shallow as our skins. We walk through volumes of the unexpressed and like snails leave behind a faint thread excreted out of ourselves. From the dew of the few flakes that melt on our faces we cannot reconstruct the snowstorm.

- John Updike, "The Blessed Man of Boston, My Grandmother's Thimble, and Fanning Island"

L'excès du réel sur le rationnel est tel que l'on peut dire que, quelles que soient les élucidations rationnelles de ce « réel », il y aura toujours du réel en reste qui résistera au pouvoir de la raison.

- Gérard Sfez, *Liotard, la faculté d'une phrase*

Carnival! ... All the booth people, not really gypsies, stare at him, and beckon weakly ... He feels his walking past them as pain. He wishes there were more people here; he feels a fool. All of this machinery assembled to extract from him his pathetic fifty cents.

- John Updike, "You'll Never Know, Dear, How Much I Love You"

My aim in the present chapter is to establish two things: a) the philosophical reasons for which Lyotard put forth and defended a theoretical antihumanism in the late 1960s / early 1970s, and b) why this antihumanism, reaching its most developed and uncompromising form in the book *Économie libidinale*, proved ethically problematic – enough so, in fact, that Lyotard sought to radically rework it, with a new theoretical vocabulary, in the mid to late 1970s.

It bears repeating that in establishing a), my concern is with the key *philosophical* factors, the various argumentative twists and turns, leading to Lyotard's early antihumanism. Above all, and at the most abstract level of analysis, I will interpret Lyotard as adhering to one overarching philosophical principle or tendency: namely, a

constantly developing and highly idiosyncratic methodological materialism, or as it is sometimes called in Lyotard scholarship, a philosophy or thinking of the event.

I will not examine in this chapter the sociological, historical, or psycho-biographical factors leading to Lyotard's early antihumanism, except in passing. Nor will I emphasize in this chapter the "consequentialist" arguments favouring Lyotard's antihumanism, of the type maintaining that humanism is pernicious in practice and should therefore be critiqued or abolished. My methodological choice in this chapter is to stick as much as possible to the internal, philosophical dynamics of Lyotard's earlier texts. My hope in doing so is to provide an original reading of his antihumanism as the philosophically interesting outcome of a certain philosophical position or tendency, rather than a piece of radicalism or provocation for the sake of it, or a mere sign of its time.<sup>20</sup> Since I will treat Lyotard's antihumanism quite seriously throughout, this exegetical chapter, then, is offered as a contribution to the fair and serious philosophical discussion of his initial antihumanist position.

My goal and method, thus expressed, are reflected in the structure of the present chapter. Question a), pertaining to the philosophical genesis of Lyotard's antihumanism, is answered in two sub-sections, 1.2 and 1.3 below. Section 1.2 will explain Lyotard's commitment to the aforementioned methodological materialism; section 1.3 will show how this methodological commitment contributes to, and perhaps necessitates, the genesis of antihumanism as a philosophical sub-position within the overall drift of Lyotard's thought. I will then go on to answer question b) – that is, to show how that antihumanism engenders an important ethical problem.

Answering points a) and b) requires a deep engagement with Lyotard's texts. But for reasons of scope and relevance, some of these will need to take precedence over others. It is generally agreed, citing the opinion of Lyotard himself,<sup>21</sup> that *Discours, figure* and *Économie libidinale* are the two most important of his texts to appear in the span stretching from the beginning of his career to 1974. Each of them comes out

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<sup>20</sup> As we saw in the Introduction, this is a common attitude among Lyotard's detractors: see for instance Ferry and Renault, *French Philosophy of the Sixties*. Lyotard himself sometimes offers a similar perspective in interviews and in his later work.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988, p.2: "...Lyotard sees himself as having written three 'real' books (*Discours, figure, Économie* [sic] *libidinale*, and *Le Différend*) ..."

strongly in favour of the methodological materialism I have mentioned, and each is markedly antihumanist. For this reason, a major part of the present chapter will be devoted to the “libidinal” philosophy which Lyotard develops in them. I will also, however, start with and devote considerable attention to certain aspects of Lyotard’s first text, *La phénoménologie*. This is because the latter comes out in favour of methodological materialism at the same time as it awkwardly poses the problem of humanism – and this seems to set the tone for Lyotard’s later thought, in all its ambiguity. Arguments from important outlying texts<sup>22</sup> such as *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* and *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* will also be referenced throughout this chapter; in general, though, a loose chronological order running from *La phénoménologie* through *Discours, figure* to *Économie libidinale* will be followed, so as to mirror Lyotard’s own development towards an antihumanist philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

Certain secondary sources figure prominently in the present chapter. Major points of reference will include James Williams and Geoffrey Bennington, for the reason that they accord careful attention to Lyotard’s early and “libidinal” works. To balance out this “Anglo-Americanized” picture, continental secondary sources such as Gualandi, Ferry and Renault will also be referenced. Where applicable, I will signal where I differ from the interpretations found in the secondary sources cited; however, as the task of this chapter is largely exegetical, I will leave off entering into any sustained engagements or debates with other interpreters until Chapter 4.

### **1.1 – Methodological Materialism from *La phénoménologie* to *Économie libidinale***

For ease of understanding, the present subsection will proceed from a general account of its subject matter to a more specific. As reflected in the further subdivisions below, I will examine Lyotard’s methodological materialism a) in general, b) during his loosely-dated phenomenological-Marxist phase, and c) during the “libidinal” philosophy of the late 60’s / early 70s.

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<sup>22</sup>Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event*, p.2: “The other works should be read as reading-notes, or preparatory to these books ...”

<sup>23</sup> My choice of primary materials should be by no means novel or controversial, in light of existing Lyotard scholarship. My reason for citing un-translated materials, occasional pieces and so on is to have at hand and compare multiple expressions of Lyotard’s basic ideas.

a) *Lyotard's Methodological Materialism in General: A Philosophy of the Event*

James Williams devotes a chapter of his *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy* to what he terms Lyotard's "materialism".<sup>24</sup> In ascribing materialism to Lyotard, Williams means that Lyotard's philosophy "puts the terrain" to be studied, to be acted within, "first ... there are no universal principles" prior to the terrain or to one's engagement in it, "there is no transcendent idea, no idea independent of experience".<sup>25</sup> For Lyotard, in other words, "[t]he matter at hand is the prior topic for any philosophy: to seek foundations elsewhere and then to return ready armed to act on the matter at hand is to misunderstand that matter."<sup>26</sup> Accordingly, Lyotard's is "a practical philosophy that starts with the study of the society or terrain in which it must operate, only then to pass on to the study of the possible, the true and the good within that society."<sup>27</sup> But this means that the possible, the true and the good – "foundations", if it is even meaningful to speak of them here – can be sought nowhere else than in the matter (i.e. the material)<sup>28</sup> at hand; and subsequently, "[f]or Lyotard, certainty" regarding the possible, the true and the good "becomes relative to the matter at hand and, hence, he risks losing any claims to absolute certainty."<sup>29</sup> But as we will see, Lyotard nonetheless "revels in this risk since it marks the possible defeat of those who seek the absolute".<sup>30</sup>

I think that Williams has rightly hit upon a defining feature of Lyotard's philosophy: its antifoundational nature, which is rooted in a tenacious affirmation of what Lyotard calls, variously, the "density", "constitutive difference" or singularity of the material it studies.<sup>31</sup> I will unpack all of this in detail below. First, however, Williams's characterization requires some comment, as confusion could arise from the ascription to

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<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*, Cambridge and Malden, Polity Press / Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1998, p.9-25.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> I will diverge from Williams in referring to "the material at hand", not "the matter at hand". I intend thereby to emphasize that Lyotard works with what is at hand, or given, whatever its nature, while avoiding the false impression that he works with "physical matter" in the vulgar materialist sense of the term.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.14-15.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.15.

<sup>31</sup> "Ce livre-ci proteste: que le donné n'est pas un texte, qu'il y a en lui une épaisseur, ou plutôt une différence, constitutive, qui n'est pas à lire, mais à voir ..." (roughly: "This book protests: that the given is not a text, that there is a density to it, or better yet a difference, which is constitutive, which does not give itself to be read, but to be seen ...") (Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, Paris, Klincksieck, 2002, p.9.)

Liotard of “materialism” plain and simple. It must be emphasized that Liotard’s philosophy is most obviously “materialist” only in the precise sense that the philosophy of Marx<sup>32</sup> can also be said to be materialist: similarly to Marx’s investigations into the commodity structure, the dynamic of capitalism, and the political events of his time, Liotard attempts to consistently begin his analyses with the material at hand, whatever its nature, and however novel or strange it might seem, working backward to more general statements and principles, the certainty of which are of course contingent upon unforeseen developments or aspects of the material from which they were derived.<sup>33</sup>

The contingency and ultimately partial nature of whatever conclusions are drawn by Liotard need to be emphasized: Williams is careful to note on this count that “Liotard’s philosophy is not a scientific materialism where the laws of physics and [those of] other natural sciences allow for the explanation of all events.”<sup>34</sup> Nor, importantly, is Liotard’s philosophy obviously “materialist” in the classical sense of a materialist substance monism, such as Democritean atomism.<sup>35</sup> To avoid such problematic impressions, I will refer throughout to Liotard’s *methodological materialism*.<sup>36</sup> By putting it in this way, I wish to highlight that *whatever the nature of the material at hand*, Liotard tries to begin there and, in a manner of speaking,<sup>37</sup> stay there. He does not wish to simply *proceed* from a transcendent structure (i.e. constructed *a priori*) towards an analysis of the terrain in question. Nor, having *arrived* at his conclusions, does he wish to claim them to be good for all time or employ them for the “explanation of all events” (i.e. speculative philosophy, exemplified by Hegel). As his philosophy develops, Liotard will work from the singular to the general to the singular

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<sup>32</sup> Marx is commonly read (or rather, merely cited on faith) as a deterministic, metaphysically monistic materialist; but this impression of his philosophy most likely results in large part from a selective reading, or from the gloss put on it by Friedrich Engels. For a more nuanced analysis of Marx’s “materialism”, see Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, London and New York, Verso, 2007, p.21-27. As to the relation between Liotard and Marx generally, this will be briefly treated below.

<sup>33</sup> Balibar emphasizes Marx’s ongoing, unfinished attempt to fit the data of capitalist society to an adequate theory, and his willingness to overhaul said theory in face of new, disconfirming facts – see *ibid*.

<sup>34</sup> Williams, *Liotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*, p.95.

<sup>35</sup> We will see below, when treating Liotard’s libidinal philosophy, that the impression of a materialistic substance monism can arise. But since the metaphysics of the libidinal philosophy concerns flows of primary desire that seem to obey impossible teleologies and produce ambiguous effects, it is questionable whether the libidinal Liotard may be read as a simple materialist *tout court*.

<sup>36</sup> Thus among that which my thesis will contribute to the literature on Liotard, one modest contribution will be to add precision to what is basically an accurate assessment by Williams.

<sup>37</sup> Liotard’s reluctance to derive transcendent ideas from his engagement with the material at hand leads him, as we will see, to emphasize the priority of that material even when doing so seems incoherent.

again; but he will not thereby claim to have captured anything apodictically certain about, or for that matter greater than, the singular. He often seems to deny, in fact, that he ever hits upon the general at all.

Elaborating on the preceding, an instructive contrast may be drawn between Lyotard's methodological materialism and the philosophy of Plato. Plato sees in the given imperfect copies of ideal types; the ideal types account for the copies ontologically and thereby accord them (and infinitely outstrip them in) value. Lyotard, by contrast, sees in the given or material at hand a density, or richness, that cannot be completely captured by language, let alone by any transcendent structure that language has, presumably, brought to thought. There is a shift in valuation: whereas for Plato, the chaos of the given is valued less than the pristine transcendent ideas that are ultimately said to give substance to and account for it, for Lyotard the given is valued higher than the remote, on his view sclerotic and terroristic transcendent structures that would deign to strip it of its life. But this is not *simply* a difference of philosophical orientation between the two thinkers: for Lyotard, "taking the side of the material"<sup>38</sup> is a decisive, and as we will see political gesture.

The gesture of taking the side of the material, of the given, in fact constitutes the guiding thread of Lyotard's thought; and this guiding thread sets him apart not just from Plato, but arguably from the larger part of the Western philosophical tradition. Indeed, even from his earliest writings, Lyotard "drifts"<sup>39</sup> and eventually actively strains against what many have identified as a main theme of Western philosophy since Parmenides and Plato: the opposition established between immanence and transcendence – or differently put, between appearance (the given, the material at hand) and reality (that which supposedly accounts for the given, rendering it meaningful) – wherein the latter of the two terms is almost always in some way privileged. A number of names suit this evaluative opposition, insofar as it is expressed as a tendency at the core of Western

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<sup>38</sup> A variation on "Taking the Side of the Figural" in Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006 (originally "Le parti pris du figural" in *Discours, figure*).

<sup>39</sup> "Dérive" – by way of illustration, Lyotard describes the process of his drift from Marxism, a body of thought that is ultimately itself beholden to the Western privileging of transcendence, in "A Memorial of Marxism: For Pierre Souyri", in Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, p.237-238 [104-107]. Far from having arrived at a logical refutation of Marxism, Lyotard increasingly *felt* himself growing distant from it. He would go on to ascribe this feeling and his drift from Marxism to something deeply problematic at the heart of Marxism itself, i.e. a *differend*.

thought: “Platonism”, as the preceding would suggest, but perhaps more inclusively, “metaphysics”, or even as I prefer, “nihilistic religiosity”. By the time of *Économie libidinale*, what I will call herein the “nihilistic religiosity” of Western philosophy has become Lyotard’s main enemy.

Speaking more technically, what Lyotard drifts away from, and later actively strains against, is the ubiquitous<sup>40</sup> impulse or tendency to recuperate singular events<sup>41</sup> into subordinate elements or utilities of systems or structures supposedly transcending, and therefore in some sense regulating them.<sup>42</sup> According to Lyotard, in accounting for singularities, i.e. events,<sup>43</sup> in this way – that is, by ascribing to them meanings or values relative to something in which they supposedly “partake”, but which is ultimately, by virtue of this, greater than them, or outside and above them – the impulse or tendency in question diverts or is manifested by the diversion of concrete desires to investment in a “beyond” of some kind. This element of diversion to a beyond accounts for why I will refer throughout to this impulse or tendency as a “religious” one, even where actual religion is not the issue. Indeed, Lyotard’s critique reveals a common philosophical thread uniting both (literally) religious as well as secular philosophical frameworks of transcendence:<sup>44</sup> because both channel desire to a transcendent beyond, be it heaven in Christianity, or the highest stage of communism in doctrinaire Marxism, *both* are, in a manner of speaking, religious. Lyotard himself, moreover, often employs religious

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<sup>40</sup> Reflecting on Mallarmé’s poem *Un coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard* in *Discours, figure*, Lyotard suggests that the impulse or tendency in question is immanent to language itself. See also *Rudiments patiens: genre dissertatif*, Paris, Union générale d’éditions, 1977, p.9, wherein Lyotard claims that a terroristic “desire for the true” (“désir du vrai”) is inscribed in even our loosest uses of language.

<sup>41</sup> The category of the event (essentially, Heidegger’s *Ereignis*) is the most general category by which Lyotard can express the singular irruption of the given (i.e. from Non-Being into Being – Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988, p. 47, par. 75 [p.77-78, par. 75]): falling in love, a political moment like May 68, the arresting effect of a Barnett Newman painting, etc. can all be termed events, but only insofar as they present a challenge to representational, i.e. nihilating-transcendent thinking. Williams defines Lyotard’s notion of the event as follows: “... [the] immediate occurrence of the thing beyond the powers of representation ... [events are] all-important paradoxes, occurrences which we cannot think adequately.” (Williams, *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*, p.22.)

<sup>42</sup> Crome and Williams, “Introduction”, in Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, p.7-8. See also Gualandi, *Lyotard*, Paris, Société d’édition les Belles Lettres, 2004, p.21-22.

<sup>43</sup> “A singularity is not so much an individual as an *event* ... Perhaps the most coherent view of Lyotard’s work as a whole is that it strives to respect the event in its singularity, and has experimented with various ways of achieving that respect.” (Bennington, *Writing the Event*, p.9.)

<sup>44</sup> Gualandi, *Lyotard*, p.32.

terminology in precisely this way to describe the impulse or tendency of Western philosophy in question.<sup>45</sup>

But why then should this impulse or tendency also be understood as “nihilistic”? For Lyotard, taking his cue from the strongly Nietzschean intellectual current of France in the late 60s/ early 70s,<sup>46</sup> the operation of ascribing value from a position of transcendence actually *devalues*, or more accurately<sup>47</sup> *nihilates* individual events. From the point of view of the religiosity of Western thought, the singularity of events, which is to say their indescribable, uncapturable or unsystematizably rich uniqueness, the mystery of their being *as such* – one might even hazard to say their *intrinsic* value, though Lyotard would likely resist such a designation – simply does not exist. More precisely, the singularity of events is effaced in light of the new, narrowly defined value or values ascribed from the point of view of whatever position of transcendence has been put forth to account for them.<sup>48</sup> Since events as such are defined for Lyotard by their singularity, this means that from the point of view of religiosity *events do not exist as such*; hence they are nihilated by this point of view. The term “nihilistic religiosity” is thus far from paradoxical, accurately naming a common operation of thought and language.

For an example of how nihilistic religiosity works, and why Lyotard is spurred to work against it, think of romantic love – or more specifically, of the singular, not necessarily sexual encounter between two bodies that sets a particular romance in motion. A systematic philosopher in the grand old German style might ascribe a relative value to

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<sup>45</sup> The opening section of *Économie libidinale* is in fact rife with such language, even where Lyotard is not critiquing religion per se, but simply metaphysics. See also the third chapter of *Rudiments païens: genre dissertatif*, Union générale d'éditions, Paris, 1977, wherein he analyses the Reformation in terms of nihilating transcendence (Luther) versus the affirmation of singularity / intensity (Münzer).

<sup>46</sup> “Although never as closely associated with Nietzsche as were Deleuze, Foucault, or even Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard was a participant in the 1972 conference at Cerisy that some have cited as the initial moment of contemporary French Nietzscheanism. And although his works of the 1960s and 1970s do not show the constant references to Nietzsche that one finds, for example, in Derrida or Deleuze, they do nevertheless display many of the Nietzschean characteristics that were in the air in Paris during those years.” (Alan D. Schrift, *Nietzsche's French Legacy: A Genealogy of Poststructuralism*, New York, Routledge, 1995, p.104-105.) See also Ferry and Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties*, and Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*.

<sup>47</sup> Apart from the notion of intrinsic value, the concept of devaluation seems to already imply a transcendent schema of valuation. This is question-begging, and I do not want to be misunderstood on this point. I therefore will refer throughout to the process as “nihilation”, “faire anéantir”, literally *making-nothing*, but more precisely *making-less-than-it-is, pushing-it-toward-nothingness*.

<sup>48</sup> This argument runs throughout Lyotard's work, but a good articulation can be found in the opening section of *Économie libidinale*.

– or, what is the same thing for Lyotard, account for – the early romantic encounter in terms of, say, its subordinate role as a moment in the unfolding, to itself, of World Spirit. Similarly, for those who are more down to earth, the encounter might be valued mostly, or even merely, for having set in motion an important chapter in the story of one’s life, or insofar as it may figure in a “life plan” of the sort “fall in love by twenty-five, marry by twenty-seven, bear first child by thirty”, etc. The problem with either case is that in making falling in love *mean* something definite, one has made narrowly determinate an event that, for Lyotard, is actually so rich, singular and mysterious in its being or happening as such that it eludes being completely accounted for in any system, structure or plan, whatsoever – including any “enlightened” structure of reciprocity or equality.<sup>49</sup> As soon as we seek to account for any event in terms of the nihilistically religious impulse or tendency – which is to say, as soon as we seek to truly *account for* the event at all – we necessarily lose something and therefore betray that event. One might easily imagine why this betrayal would be a bad thing – a particular falling in love, to continue the example, might be left behind because it does not fit in within an existing structure of meaning.

By contrast, Lyotard would approach such a matter as falling in love from the perspective of his version of methodological materialism: that is to say, he would examine the event from as “open-minded” an observer standpoint as possible, find that the idioms and descriptive tools we have to account for it do not do it justice, i.e. that it is too rich for them, and finally, proclaim in his writings that such is the case. The voicing of this conclusion would in turn become new material at hand, something of a watchword suggesting but not necessarily telling with certainty how he and others should handle future encounters with future events. Note that Lyotard has kept here to the material at hand: he has begun with a real experience of falling in love, noted that he cannot account for it entirely, and has subsequently given it room to breathe, so to speak, orienting his position as observer and actor accordingly while reporting the material-relative truth of his findings to others. As we will see in subsequent chapters, this method and the

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<sup>49</sup> Lyotard writes somewhat elliptically on love, but the preceding is a plausible interpretation. See *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1988, Chapter 15, as well as *Soundproof Room: Malraux’s Anti-aesthetics*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, Chapter 11, and *Signed, Malraux*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p.125 [144].

normative suggestion of adopting it belies weighty ethical and political stakes; for now, the key thing to note is how this differs from the nihilistic religiosity that Lyotard ascribes to the bulk of the Western tradition.

It should now be clear that Lyotard espouses a radical *philosophy of the event*,<sup>50</sup> which is to say an affirmation of irreducible singularity against the nihilistic religiosity of transcendent structures of meaning. The reader, however, will likely have sensed by this point that there are some major logical problems attendant to Lyotard's choice of methodological materialism. To begin, there is the matter of how he can justify his commitment to beginning and ending his analyses in the material at hand.

Is this commitment itself something that suggests itself in, or arises from, the material at hand? Note that if it is not, then Lyotard appears to have committed a performative contradiction: by adopting methodological materialism he says that he will always begin from where, in the first instance, he does not. The performative contradiction can perhaps be dissolved by claiming that the choice to adopt his methodological materialism is itself a *meta*-methodological move. But this still presents a problem for Lyotard because it suggests one of two possibilities: either, that he has arbitrarily chosen his method, which would lead us to wonder why precisely we should follow him in his choice; or, that there exists some vantage point from which he has judged his methodological materialism to be the best methodological option. The problem with the former case is obvious; appeal to arbitrary choice is not exactly a justification. And if the latter case is true, i.e. if Lyotard has judged from an "objective" vantage point, then this amounts to saying that he has employed some method or principle of selecting among methodologies.

Perhaps Lyotard has selected methodological materialism because it suggests itself in the material at hand (i.e. in the set of possible methodologies) as self-evidently superior. But this is question-begging; it does not satisfactorily answer the question of the justification of Lyotard's methodological choice, but rather leads one to pose it anew (i.e. "by what principle, other than methodological materialism, is methodological materialism judged superior?"). A second possibility however is that in selecting methodological materialism, Lyotard has operated within the confines of a transcendent

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event*.

structure of meaning that accords relative value to methodologies – a structure of the very type his methodological materialism seeks to eschew. This possibility ultimately makes no sense, because it would mean that from a position of transcendence Lyotard has deduced the philosophical (if not practical) impossibility of working and judging from within a position of transcendence.

It appears, then, to be inconsistent with methodological materialism for Lyotard to claim that the justification of his methodological materialism is not itself derived from the material at hand. But what if Lyotard *does* claim to take his methodological cue from the material at hand? Then two things follow from this: first, that the truth of what he says about the material at hand will always and only be relative to the material at hand, which is itself contingent; and secondly, that his claim that the material at hand, qua event, is too rich to be captured in a transcendent structure, betrays a pragmatically inconsistent certainty that this is so. In other words: Lyotard simultaneously advances the claim that nothing he says about events can be known to be absolutely certain, and the claim, which itself carries the pragmatic valence of a claim to certainty, that events are too rich to be done justice by transcendent structures. The first claim leads us to question on what grounds Lyotard should claim that his philosophy is more compelling than others, especially that of those claiming to produce certainties; the second compounds this scepticism by showing Lyotard's methodology to be ultimately inconsistent.

Lyotard is caught, then, between the inconsistency generated by justifying his methodology outside of the material at hand, and the inconsistency of justifying his methodology from within the material at hand. In short, following here the analyses of Williams,<sup>51</sup> Manfred Frank<sup>52</sup> and, by proxy, Jürgen Habermas,<sup>53</sup> Lyotard's philosophy appears to be through and through plagued by doubts and performative contradictions. This suggests to us that it is not pragmatically possible to espouse a philosophy of radical singularity such as Lyotard attempts to do. And it would further suggest that similar

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<sup>51</sup> Williams's *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy* tracks Lyotard's engagement with these logical problems, suggesting certain ways in which he may or may not have surmounted them.

<sup>52</sup> See Frank, "Dissension et consensus selon Jean-François Lyotard et Jürgen Habermas. Réécrire la modernité", *Les Cahiers de philosophie*, 1988, no. 5, pp. 163-183.

<sup>53</sup> See Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 1990, for various instances of the same argument employed against other "Nietzschean" thinkers.

attempts made by Lyotard's post-structuralist contemporaries to formulate such a philosophy are also doomed to inconsistency for the same reasons.<sup>54</sup>

This would seem to be the last word on Lyotard; and yet, I maintain that his is nonetheless a philosophy worthy of careful study. Though it may seem it, this is not an inconsistent claim in light of the above analysis. Lyotard is not unaware of the logical problems attendant to his methodology, and in attempting to elude them he advances much that is philosophically original and perhaps problematic to the very cognitive<sup>55</sup> language that would condemn him for his inconsistency. In short, when presented with the pragmatic difficulties of espousing his methodology, as well as its attendant antihumanism, Lyotard helps us to think productively at the very margins of cognitive language. By the end of Chapter 3, the reader will have a sense of the particular content of Lyotard's replies to those critics who charge him with failing to produce clear and consistent truth claims, and with having committed a performative contradiction. Hopefully the reader will also see why I think this content is worthy of interest. For now, it will suffice to briefly illustrate the most general thrust of Lyotard's replies.

As we just saw, the whole problem is that Lyotard claims that the material at hand is too rich to be brought entirely under the command of a transcendent system of meaning. Pragmatically speaking, neither he nor anyone else is able to make such a claim with consistency. But here a question arises: suppose that there *is* something about the material at hand, the event, that necessarily escapes the nihilating operation of transcendence; then by what criteria can Lyotard be said to have committed an *error* in attempting to state that this is so? Only by the very criteria he is contesting. If the material at hand outstrips cognitive language, then Lyotard's failure to express it in such language, perhaps, does not lie with him, but with cognitive language itself.

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<sup>54</sup> See Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

<sup>55</sup> I mean by this designation, following Lyotard throughout his later career, discourse of the type that seeks to produce true claims about the reality of referents by means of a logically sound method incorporating intersubjective verifiability as one of its criteria. As Habermas succinctly puts it: "describing and explaining facts" in such a way that implies successful communication (Habermas, *On the Pragmatics of Social Interaction: Preliminary Studies in the Theory of Communicative Action*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 2001, p.62). Lyotard will later argue that this genre of discourse is one among many, and that it holds no obvious pre-eminence over others (*Le différend* constitutes among other things an extended discussion of this idea.).

A very general way of putting this idea is that if a subject matter is itself contradictory, inconclusive or elusive, then to some extent, so might legitimately be one's discourse about that subject matter; one does the best one possibly can with the tools one has, and that is good enough. Georges Bataille, a strong influence on Lyotard during the "libidinal" phase of his career, puts it thus: "...in choosing to hear no other reasons but its own, the intellect errs; for it can go into the reasons of the heart if it so chooses, provided it does not insist on reducing them first to the calculation of reason. Once it has made this concession it can define a domain in which it is no longer the sole rule of conduct; [i.e. a domain which] surpasses it by nature. The most remarkable thing is that it is quite capable of speaking of what surpasses it ..."<sup>56</sup> Similar arguments are not so rare in the history of philosophy: notable cases include Nietzsche,<sup>57</sup> Heidegger,<sup>58</sup> and Gadamer.<sup>59</sup> Such arguments assume that reason or cognitive discourse can encourage or impose a kind of blindness with regard to aspects of subject matters lying outside of its scope, insofar as it "attempts to disconcert" thought which would otherwise be open to said aspects.<sup>60</sup>

Let us however leave generalities aside, and look at a more precise account of how this type of argument works in Lyotard's case. Given the impossibility of pronouncing the singularity of the material at hand cognitively, it does not automatically follow that one can pronounce the *non*-singularity of the material at hand cognitively. For one thing, any such pronouncement would be question-begging, since the discourse in which it would be expressed necessarily nihilates singularity. Moreover, Lyotard is not saying something false, but rather something *senseless*, according to the rules of cognitive discourse.<sup>61</sup> That is to say, he is saying something that cognitive discourse can neither affirm nor deny.

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<sup>56</sup> Bataille, *The Accursed Share Volumes II and III*, New York, Zone Books, 2007, p.111-112.

<sup>57</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, New York, Random House, Inc., 1989, §22, p.30-31.

<sup>58</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, New York, Harper & Row, Publishers, Incorporated, 1962, §44c, p.269-273.

<sup>59</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, New York, Seabury Press, 1975 Part II, Section 2, #3.

<sup>60</sup> Denis Dumas draws attention to *Überrumpelungsversuch*, roughly "an attempt to disconcert", as examined by Heidegger and Gadamer (Dumas, *Geschichtlichkeit und Transzendentalphilosophie. Zur Frage ihrer Vermittlung vor dem Hintergrund der Phänomenologie Edmund Husserls*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1999, p.214-217.).

<sup>61</sup> I will not enumerate these here, as doing so could constitute a separate philosophical study. I suggest however that non-contradiction and having a clear referent are two of these rules. According to cognitive

Put yet another way: just because it cannot *affirm* it without losing pragmatic consistency, it does not follow that cognitive discourse can thus *deny* the methodological priority of the singularity of the event. The partisans of cognitive discourse may demonstrate that either the *form*<sup>62</sup> or the *contents*<sup>63</sup> of Lyotard's arguments for methodological materialism fail to live up to the criteria of cognitive discourse; about the *truth-value* of his methodological principles, expressed as propositions, they can give no final word. We are in the territory tread by the Vienna Circle and the early Wittgenstein: failing to soundly establish a referent, it is not obvious that such an argument can be settled. But whereas Wittgenstein claims that we must "pass over in silence" that which does not fit into a cognitively-inspired structure of meaning,<sup>64</sup> Lyotard, following Bataille, nonetheless speaks.

Lyotard frequently compares his methodology to that of the avant-gardes in contemporary plastic arts and music. Experimenting with ever new forms, the latter routinely show how a genre of presentation may limit what can be coherently presented. There might be something falling outside of the scope or competence of a particular genre that nonetheless demands to be presented;<sup>65</sup> but the philosopher, or painter,<sup>66</sup> or

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discourse, the failure to observe them would appear to produce a *senseless*, rather than a *false* claim. Think for instance of the proposition "Unicorns eat hay"; it is neither true nor false, but rather ill-formed and therefore senseless, because the term "Unicorns" does not refer to anything which for cognitive discourse would qualify as real.

<sup>62</sup> E.g. Lyotard has committed a performative contradiction.

<sup>63</sup> E.g. Lyotard is speaking of "the event as such", something that is not a clear referent about which intersubjectively verifiable claims can be made.

<sup>64</sup> Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, prop. 7.

<sup>65</sup> When there is a *différend*, a key Lyotardian concept to be explored in Chapter Two, "... something 'asks' to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away. This is when the human beings who thought they could use language as an instrument of communication learn through the feeling of pain which accompanies silence (and of pleasure which accompanies the invention of a new idiom), that they are summoned by language, not to augment to their profit the quantity of information communicable through existing idioms, but to recognize that what remains to be phrased exceeds what they can currently phrase, and that they must be allowed to institute idioms which do not yet exist." (Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.13, par.23 [p.30, par.23].)

<sup>66</sup> It is of interest to note that at many points during his career, Lyotard depicts painting as an activity akin to philosophy. See for instance *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p.15 [27]: "The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he [sic] writes or the work he [sic] creates is not in principle governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged according to a determinant judgment, by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating. The artist and the writer therefore work without rules and in order to establish the rules for what *will have been made*."

musician,<sup>67</sup> insofar as she attempts to present that something, must produce what appears to be a failure in light of that genre. If the painter attempts to paint something as intractable to representation as the present moment, for instance, the failure to adequately do so is chalked up to the limitations intrinsic to her genre.<sup>68</sup>

The analogy is instructive because it illustrates how if Lyotard is unable to present the over-richness of the event in a consistent manner according to the pragmatic rules of cognitive discourse, then this is perhaps merely a function of the limits of cognitive discourse – *and there are other discourses in which to speak*. I do not wish to be misunderstood here: saying as much does not suggest that Lyotard has thereby refuted his critics. Rather, it is simply not possible to establish the issue either way, because it does not follow from the inability to speak about something coherently according to a particular set of rules that it is not the case (nor for that matter, does it follow that it is the case). Hence Lyotard and his opponents beg the question at each other, and Lyotard is forced to convince his readers on some other grounds than the cognitive.<sup>69</sup> As we will see later on, this leads him to have to defend the claim that he is doing *philosophy* at all; he will offer a contentious definition of philosophy as a paradoxical genre of discourse whose stakes are to find out by what rules it is to proceed.<sup>70</sup> But the important thing for now is to understand that he is troubling the cognitive by speaking to it that which it, by definition, cannot speak.

Having thus broadly examined the methodological choices and problems surrounding Lyotard's work, it remains for me to reconstruct in the two following

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<sup>67</sup> See Lyotard, "Several Silences", in *Driftworks*, United States of America, Semiotext(e), 1984.

<sup>68</sup> See Lyotard, "Newman: The Instant" in *The Inhuman*.

<sup>69</sup> One should also bear in mind Hans Albert's "Münchhausen trilemma", which posits that it is impossible for a rational or cognitive discourse to stipulate its ultimate foundations without committing a fallacy of some kind. Either such foundations will always have to rest on other foundations (problem of infinite regression), or they will be derived by circular argumentation (problem of begging the question), or the search will just have to be satisfied with breaking off at some point (problem of arbitrariness) (See Albert, *Treatise on Critical Reason*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985, Chapter 1, Section 2). My point in bringing up Albert is that if Lyotard cannot rationally give an ultimate foundation for his position, it is ultimately not clear that his rationalist opponents can either. The fact that they *try* to nonetheless, *perhaps* recommends their philosophy over Lyotard's, but this is not immediately obvious. Also bear in mind Karl-Otto Apel's debate with Albert. Against Albert, Apel advocates the possibility of "final grounding" through transcendental reflexion. See Apel, "The Apriori of the Communication Community and the Foundations of Ethics: The Problem of a Rational Foundation of Ethics in the Scientific Age" in Apel, *Towards a Transformation of Philosophy*, Milwaukee, Marquette University Press, 1998.

<sup>70</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.60-61, par.98 [p.90, par.98]. The same goes for painting, literature, music; cf. footnote 45.

subsections how, precisely, he develops his methodological materialism, and how the logical problems it engenders lead him to the proposed solution of *Économie libidinale*.

b) *Methodological Materialism in the Phenomenological-Marxist Phase of Lyotard's Thought*

Lyotard's first book, *La phénoménologie*, offers a favourable exposition of phenomenology's basic "style"<sup>71</sup> or, more accurately, its basic methodological bent. According to Lyotard, the latter is that of interminably returning to that "which appears to consciousness", i.e. the "given", the "thing itself" "which one perceives, of which one thinks and speaks".<sup>72</sup> Phenomenology, in other words, "plunge[s] into matters innocently";<sup>73</sup> it seeks "to explore [the] given ... without constructing hypotheses concerning either the relationship which binds this phenomena to the being *of which* it is phenomena, or the relationship which unites it with the I *for which* it is phenomena".<sup>74</sup> Hence at the heart of phenomenology there is a "denial of science", which is to say a "refusal to proceed to explanation [of the given]".<sup>75</sup> It will be seen below that this denial of science has on Lyotard's view both a positive and a negative side. Suffice it to say for now that he sees in phenomenology generally an enterprise which methodologically prioritizes the material at hand over structures of meaning supposedly transcending it; that is to say, for phenomenology, all knowledge (all determinations-as, i.e. nihilations of the event) is ultimately traceable back to a "radical non-knowledge" (i.e. the radical indeterminacy of the event as given in perception).<sup>76</sup> With this in mind, *La phénoménologie*, then, obviously treats of a methodological materialism of the type I have ascribed to Lyotard himself.

It is nonetheless important to note that *La phénoménologie* is not an uncritical primer on the phenomenological method, or for that matter on the phenomenological tradition. On one hand, Lyotard notes phenomenology's problematic, because

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<sup>71</sup> Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1991, p.34 [9].

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p.32 [7].

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p.33 [7].

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.32-33 [7].

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p.33 [7].

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p.32 [6].

historically-rooted, pretension to a-historicity,<sup>77</sup> and goes on to treat phenomenology as a historically situated phenomenon requiring and ultimately lacking a convincing account of historicity. On the other, he proceeds to critique phenomenology by distinguishing a positive as well as a negative side to its basic methodological “denial of science”, both of which are historically manifested in the phenomenological tradition.<sup>78</sup> He locates the positive side of phenomenology in the fact that it returns interminably to the beginnings of science, notably the human sciences, to “recover humanity itself, beneath any objectivist schema, which the human sciences can never recover”.<sup>79</sup> For the methodologically materialist Lyotard of *La phénoménologie*, this is a good thing because “humanity” appears to be an event-sympathetic, permanently open and therefore perpetually unfinished locus of historical change and the creation of meaning.<sup>80</sup> But Lyotard notes that the “denial of science” at the heart of phenomenology needn’t concretize itself in this manner, i.e. as a recovery of the proper relation of the human to the human sciences. It can just as easily, perhaps, lapse into the “stale, ridiculous arguments of theology and spiritualist philosophy”.<sup>81</sup> On this point Lyotard contrasts Husserl and Heidegger to illustrate phenomenology’s two sides: in the case of Husserl, the denial of science is accomplished with the aim of providing a pre-rational foundation for scientific rationality, whereas the “imperceptible inflection” given to phenomenology by Heidegger “turn[s] this prerationality into an irrationality, and phenomenology into a stronghold of irrationalism”.<sup>82</sup>

Whatever we make of Lyotard’s characterization of Heidegger here, it must be noted that above all he seeks in *La phénoménologie* to account for how phenomenology may be said to stand with respect to Marxism – certainly a topical concern in the intellectual life of 1950s France.<sup>83</sup> Lyotard looks to phenomenology “not to replace the sciences of man, but to focus their problematics, thus selecting their results and orienting

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<sup>77</sup> Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, p.32 [6].

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33 [7-8].

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.136 [125].

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132 [121]. The ramifications of this view for humanism and antihumanism will be discussed below.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p.136 [125].

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33 [8].

<sup>83</sup> Cf. the concerns of Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Lefort, etc.

their research”.<sup>84</sup> Concretely, this means turning to the Husserlian pre-rationalism (not irrationalism) of phenomenology not only against the rise of (orthodox) French Heideggerianism,<sup>85</sup> but more importantly perhaps, against the dogmatic “objectivist”<sup>86</sup> tendencies of French Marxism.

Embodied in the Parti Communiste Français, the dominant strand of French Marxism in 1954 could certainly be described as tending toward a kind of “objectivism” or “scientism”; indeed, Marxism has historically proven susceptible to repeated lapses into philosophical determinism, more specifically the denial of importance of individual human experience and agency in favour of schemas of history and social action as domains of scientific certainty.<sup>87</sup> But if, as Lyotard maintains, a mere inflection can turn phenomenological inquiry in the direction of Heideggerian “irrationalism” then it cannot be a simple matter of putting Marxism on the right track by uncritically welding it to the project of Husserlian phenomenology. Ultimately, phenomenology as a self-contained *project* of grounding scientific rationalism must give precedence to a properly *historical* materialism capable of warding off negative theology, spiritualism, and the like. For Lyotard, this means neither a synthesis of phenomenology and Marxism,<sup>88</sup> nor exactly a mutual enrichment of the two, so much as it entails a Marxism enriched and oriented by a firmly phenomenological “style”<sup>89</sup> or *methodology*.

Lyotard will seek out just this kind of Marxism in his practical activism and expressly political writings, under the post-Trotskyite group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, and subsequently the splinter group *Pouvoir ouvrier*. Expanding upon the ideology of “Left Communist” thinkers such as Luxemburg and Pannekoek,<sup>90</sup> *Socialisme ou Barbarie*

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<sup>84</sup> Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, p.34 [8-9].

<sup>85</sup> In particular, the work of Beaufret and his followers. See Ferry and Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties*, p.122.

<sup>86</sup> I use this term in the sense of a variant of Marxism that would view society as more or less mechanically developing along with its economic base.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Mao’s complaint against Stalin’s *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*: “[Stalin’s text] from first to last says nothing about the superstructure. It is not concerned with people; it considers things, not people ...” (Mao, *On Practice and Contradiction*, London and New York, Verso, 2007, p.117.)

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, p.127 [115]: “no serious reconciliation between those two philosophies may be attempted ... Phenomenology has always been led to pit its theses against Marxism”.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34 [9].

<sup>90</sup> Lyotard, “A Memorial of Marxism: For Pierre Souyri”, p.233 [97]. See also Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*, p.111: “...*Socialisme ou Barbarie* distanced itself from orthodox Trotskyism, developed a state-capitalist theory of the USSR, a critique of Leninist forms of political organization, and a defining emphasis on the extension of the self-management principle to all domains social life.”

provided Lyotard with an avenue to pursue rigorous and original analyses and critiques of the Algerian war of independence and its effects in metropolitan France. But as Crome and Williams suggest, albeit somewhat facetiously, “since the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* analysis was already a limit extension of Marxism, arriving after successive refinements, there was little room to manoeuvre in terms of claiming that the failure [of the prediction that the Algerian war would produce an economic and social revolution] was due to a rectifiable error in revolutionary theory. Any disillusionment with the politics of the group would have to lead to a radically new way of thinking about the political.”<sup>91</sup> The group did in fact splinter in 1964 under the weight of a tendency stemming from decidedly un-Marxist theses advanced by Cornelius Castoriadis in 1959.<sup>92</sup> Lyotard had displayed a similar estrangement from the basic categories of even *Socialisme ou Barbarie*’s “limit-case” Marxism by 1960, writing of the increasing distaste of the proletariat for “worn-out organizations” of the Left, but more fundamentally, decisively, and originally even, for “the political sphere itself”.<sup>93</sup> Nonetheless, and despite his “sympathy ... for the majority of the theses presented by Castoriadis”,<sup>94</sup> Lyotard would limp on with the anti-Castoriadis faction *Pouvoir ouvrier* until 1966. As he explains, despite his disillusionment, a core truth of Marxism – its sensitivity to the *différend*, to the injustice attendant to the nihilation of emergent singularity by transcendence – kept him in its orbit for years to come.<sup>95</sup>

To summarize the loosely-dated phenomenological-Marxist phase of Lyotard’s thought, we see throughout a firm, if nuanced commitment to methodological materialism of the type identified at this chapter’s outset. Phenomenology and Marxism are for Lyotard methods that (ideally, at least) begin in the material at hand and ultimately incessantly return to it with theses that are tentative and provisional at best. Phenomenology gives way to Marxism insofar as the latter wards off irrational, ahistorical subjectivism. But Marxism is refreshed by the basic style of phenomenology

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<sup>91</sup> Crome and Williams in Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, p.170.

<sup>92</sup> Lyotard, “A Memorial of Marxism: For Pierre Souyri”, p.238-239 [106-108].

<sup>93</sup> Lyotard, “The State and Politics in the France of 1960”, in Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, p.192 [*La guerre des Algériens: Écrits 1956-1963*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1989, p.187].

<sup>94</sup> Lyotard, “A Memorial for Marxism: For Pierre Souyri”, p.241 [113].

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p.242-243 [113-118].

against the tendency to become a rigid, “objective” schema or nihilating framework of the type that Lyotard’s basic methodological materialist bent resists.

At the limit, (refined) Marxism is for Lyotard in the 1950s and 60s a method of analysis and intervention in the social field capable in principle of identifying and critiquing the false transcendence of not only capitalism and its institutions, but their mirror image in the scientism and bureaucracy of the Soviet Union and PCF (as well as its most notable though certainly not slavishly sympathetic philosopher, Louis Althusser).<sup>96</sup> True to thoroughgoing methodological materialism, Lyotard’s Marxism does not appear to offer much by way of a positive, detailed vision of a future society but serves rather, at this point in his career, as something approaching a critical theory of the existing one. As I will explain further in the next section, this fact, along with Lyotard’s growing sense of “drift” from what he suspects is an ineradicably nihilating, transcendent aspect of Marxism,<sup>97</sup> leads him to seek supplementary support outside of Marxism for a methodological materialism capable of grounding ethics and political action.

### c) *Methodological Materialism in the Libidinal Phase of Lyotard’s Thought*

Throughout the 1960s into the early 1970s, phenomenology and above all Marxism remain integral methods, or at least “styles” and themes, in Lyotard’s writings. But at a decisive moment, he drifts from both, complicating his affinity for them with an idiosyncratic reading of Freud. In fact, the Lyotard whose polemic with Althusser I noted above was already deeply engaged in reading Freud (and, by extension, Lacan). The late 60s and early 70s present us with a version of Lyotard who will seek in Freud the resources to break almost altogether from not only phenomenology<sup>98</sup> and Marxism,<sup>99</sup> but most of the Western philosophical tradition as well.

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<sup>96</sup> Pages 78-166 of *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, Paris, Union Générale d’Éditions, 1973, are devoted to an attack on Althusser over the importance and nature of the Marxist concept of alienation.

<sup>97</sup> An exemplary formulation from a few years later in Lyotard’s career: “...des gauchistes: nihilistes établis sur un Ailleurs assuré” (“... Leftists: nihilists established on [or anchored in] an assured Elsewhere”). (Lyotard, *Rudiments païens*, p.69.).

<sup>98</sup> His basic, abiding respect for the “style” of phenomenology notwithstanding, in *Discours, figure*, p.21, Lyotard states the following: “La phénoménologie ne peut pas atteindre à la donation parce que, fidèle à la tradition philosophique de l’Occident, elle est encore une réflexion sur la *connaissance*, et qu’une telle réflexion a pour fonction de résorber l’événement, de récupérer l’Autre en Même.” (“Phenomenology cannot measure up to donation because, faithful to the Western philosophical tradition, it is still a reflection on *knowledge*, and such a reflection has for its function the re-absorption of the event, the recuperation of

Two of the most important Freudian texts for Lyotard are the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.<sup>100</sup> Of particular importance for Lyotard is, first of all, Freud's notion of the polymorphous perversity or, as Bennington plausibly renames it, the "polymorphous diversity"<sup>101</sup> of the infant body. Secondly, Lyotard makes much of Freud's two-fold definition of desire as primary and secondary process.

The two concepts – polymorphous diversity and the two-tiered notion of desire – are intimately linked. "Polymorphous diversity" designates the distribution of "sexuality", or more accurately *desire*,<sup>102</sup> conceived as a general process of energetic flow and investiture, and the subsequent production of pleasure, across potentially any "erotogenic zone"<sup>103</sup> on the infant's body prior to the more circumscribed investment which, as the infant grows, will privilege the genital organs and certain other zones.<sup>104</sup>

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the Other to/as the Same.") Lyotard turns to Freud because "L'événement ne peut pas être posé ailleurs que dans l'espace vacant ouvert par le désir." ("There can be no question of the event outside of the vacant space opened up by desire.") (*Discours, figure*, p.22.)

<sup>99</sup> Marxism for the post-Marxist Lyotard is not simply nihilating-religious, since at bottom it also lends an ear to radical wrongs. As he puts it in *The Differend*, "Marxism has not come to an end, but how does it continue? ... The wrong done to phrases by capital would [appear to be] a universal one. Even if the wrong is not universal ... the silent feeling that signals a differend remains to be listened to. Responsibility to thought requires it. This is the way in which Marxism has not come to an end, as the feeling of the differend" (par.236, p.171 [246]). The meaning of this statement, coming as it does from a later text, should become clear upon reading Chapter 2.2 below.

<sup>100</sup> We could add to this list *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which anticipates the later Freudian concepts adopted by Lyotard; he in fact devotes a section of *Discours, figure* to a penetrating analysis of this text. I will restrict my analysis to the two aforementioned texts for reasons of scope.

<sup>101</sup> Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event*, p.26. Lyotard himself flags the term "polymorphous perversity" as question-beggingly normative: "So-called 'perverse' polymorphism, really simply diverse ..." (Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.21 [31]). Put differently, "perversions" can simply be read as "diversions" of desire from their average or socially accepted course.

<sup>102</sup> Freud argues for the existence of childhood sexuality, but he does not designate thereby a childhood analog of the adult, largely hetero-normatively determined desires and practices that are popularly understood by the term "sexuality". To avoid potential confusion along these lines, and following Lyotard, I will speak of the polymorphous diversity of *desire*, rather than of sexuality.

<sup>103</sup> For Freud, an erotogenic zone is "a part of the skin or mucous membrane [incl. potentially any organ] in which stimuli of a certain sort evoke a feeling of pleasure possessing a particular quality." (Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, New York, Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1962, p.49, 99.)

<sup>104</sup> "Perversions" or "sexual aberrations" for Freud denote "deviations...in respect of both...the [hetero-normatively determined] sexual object and the [hetero-normatively determined] sexual aim." (Ibid., p.2.) By definition, infants are therefore "perverts", because their desires are polymorphously embodied and expressed. In other words, according to Freud, "There are [biologically and socially] pre-destined erotogenic zones [e.g. the genitals] ... however, ... any other part of [the infant's] skin or mucous membrane can take over the functions of an erotogenic zone, and must therefore have some aptitude in that direction. Thus the quality of the stimulus has more to do with producing the pleasurable feeling than has the nature of the part of the body concerned." (Ibid., p.49.) Elsewhere, Freud will say that "It seems probable that any part of the skin and any sense-organ – probably, indeed, *any* organ, can function as an

Infantile desire is also, for Freud, characterized by its lack of a fixed and/or external object.<sup>105</sup> The distinction between this original, global, more or less anarchic<sup>106</sup> distribution of desire, and its later, according to Freud necessary<sup>107</sup> investiture in particular regions at the expense of others, corresponds to the definition of desire as a two-tiered process.

On the one hand, there is desire at the “second tier”, which is to say the *conscious* or *unconscious* investment of energy by a subject in a privileged region of the body, or in a lost or lacked object, such as the breast or penis or vagina of the other. This kind of desire presupposes a (more or less) well-formed subject, as well as a field of representations, however minimal this might be in the early stages of development, in which the desired object may be situated and thereby “made sense of”, “navigated”, etc. Hence such desire is not characteristic of the polymorphously diverse infantile body, but rather a more mature stage of the organism. Such desire falls under what Freud terms “secondary process”.<sup>108</sup>

On the other hand, there is desire in the sense of the anonymous (because not presupposing a well-formed subject), ambiguous (because simultaneously in the service of impossible teleologies)<sup>109</sup> and therefore *a-conscious*<sup>110</sup> flows of energy that precede secondary process. These no doubt constitute the aforementioned desire that is proper to

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erotogenic zone, though there are some particularly marked erotogenic zones whose excitation would seem to be secured from the very first by certain organic contrivances.” (Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, p.99.) Recall that, following Lyotard, I will designate “perversion” less normatively, as “diversion”.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p.49-50, 99.

<sup>106</sup> Freud states that there are “[biologically] predestined erotogenic zones”, e.g. the genitals. But he also states that “any other” parts of the body may serve as erotogenic zones, and these are selected “in some way or another”, one possible meaning of which I take to be: quite often haphazardly. (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, New York, Toronto and London, Bantam Books, Inc., 1967, p.49-50.)

<sup>107</sup> In addition to there being the aforementioned “[biologically] predestined erotogenic zones”, Freud holds that “The early efflorescence of infantile sexual life is doomed to extinction because its wishes are incompatible with reality and with the inadequate stage of development which the child has reached.” (Ibid., p.42.)

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p.64.

<sup>109</sup> In *ibid.* Freud famously posits the idea of a desire that, viewed from one perspective, tends towards the maintenance, thriving and reproduction of the desiring organism, but which, viewed from another perspective, actually tends towards the organism’s extinction. This is the oft-referenced distinction between “Eros” and “the death drive”.

<sup>110</sup> Thus we must distinguish between *conscious* desire (which employs or interprets representations), *unconscious* desire (which also employs or interprets representations, but in spite of the intentions of the ego or conscious subject, as in dreaming or parapraxes), and that aspect of unconscious desire that is more accurately *a-conscious* (which does not employ or interpret representations, but merely flows as well as acts on, and reacts to, blockages of its path).

the infant body, but as we will see, they do not disappear when the body matures and its polymorphous diversity is “corralled” into secondary process. Since infancy precedes the formation of the subject, and since infantile desire persists in the adult organism as a-conscious, such desire is rightly termed “anonymous”. But what does it mean to say that such desire is also “ambiguous”? For Freud, original desire can be described as at once “Eros”, or “life drive”, and “Thanatos”, or “death drive”. In his libidinal economics, the living organism always tends towards a prior, in fact primordial state of complete rest, characterized by a lack of external or internal irritation or “unpleasure”<sup>111</sup> (i.e. the organism tends towards death: “the death drive”, “the Nirvana principle”);<sup>112</sup> but at the same time, the particular manners in which the organism tries to evade external irritation tend, ironically,<sup>113</sup> to cause the organism to become negentropic (for a time) and to avoid deleterious processes brought on by interaction with its environment. This renders the path towards death or “Nirvana” highly circuitous, not only prolonging life but also producing complexity, specialization, reproduction and evolution.<sup>114</sup>

This notion of desire as an anonymous, as well as simultaneously creative-destructive flow of energy, distinct from secondary process, is what Freud sees as operative in the dream-work,<sup>115</sup> and as crucial to the analysis of traumatic neuroses.<sup>116</sup> He terms it “primary process”.<sup>117</sup> The foregoing definition of primary process entails that desire as meaningful or meaning-directed secondary process, is at bottom nothing other than primary process expressed as a particular configuration of its singular basic units or, as Lyotard will term them, intensities.<sup>118</sup> As noted, striving blindly towards a state of

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<sup>111</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p.21.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p.70-71, 79, 97-98.

<sup>113</sup> If for Hegel there is a “ruse of reason”, in Freud we thus find a “ruse of desire”.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71, 97-98.

<sup>115</sup> See Lyotard, “The Dream-work does not Think” (in Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader*, Oxford and New York, Blackwell, 1989, and Lyotard’s *Discours, figure*) and “Jewish Oedipus” (in *Driftworks*; “Oedipe Juive” in *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*). Lyotard argues that although one may read dreams as meaningful texts, the operations that they reveal – i.e. the dream-work, the distorting processes of inversion, compression and the like which render dreams so bizarre – suggest that there is something non-meaningful at work on the signs comprising them. This something would be desire as primary process, which “works” in such a way that creates and destroys without intending or meaning anything in particular and hence distorts actual “fabrics” or “tableaus” of meaning.

<sup>116</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p.28-31.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p.64.

<sup>118</sup> “Lyotard considers intensities as unbound excitations of force which are characterized by their displaceability, their instantaneity and their resistance to the temporal syntheses of memory.” (Iain

complete cessation in the face of external excitations, primary process as “death drive” dissimulates itself as “life drive” (keeping in mind of course that the converse is always also true!). This is to say that it creates a circuitous fabric that arrests its impulse towards death in the short term, so as to be surer of arriving there later. Secondary process can thus be viewed as a sifting and arresting (or a having-been-sifted, a having-been-arrested) of certain elements or intensities of primary process at the expense of others, in response to provocation by the organism’s environment. For example, if the body of the infant non-subject is “pan-sexual” in a certain awkward sense of the term, its desire in the face of external excitation comes to be fixed in, or as, a secondary process wherein sexual desire is to occur only with and with respect to certain body parts in certain social situations.<sup>119</sup>

Lyotard will adopt the Freudian splitting of desire to recast his notion of the material at hand as both primary process, i.e. the simultaneously creative/destructive flow of energy, as well as secondary process, i.e. the accretion of primary flows, or intensities, into structures capable of capturing, regulating and putting to work further intensities. Energy flows/intensities and accretions of such flows/intensities may seem at a glance to comprise a strange and perhaps arbitrary characterization of “the material at hand”. Two things however should be noted here.

First, Freud’s theoretical posits are largely the result of “intuition”,<sup>120</sup> or, exemplary of Freudian analysis, an equal, “floating” attention,<sup>121</sup> a state of openness to the singularity or “evental” character of his empirical data – an openness that Lyotard will repeatedly cite as exemplary of his own philosophical temperament.<sup>122</sup> As to the obvious response that Freud is nihilating the singularity of that data by fitting it under explanatory theoretical posits and schemas of interpretation, the early Freudian Lyotard of *Discours, figure* seems to struggle with this.<sup>123</sup> In subsequent texts, however, he makes

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Hamilton Grant, in Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.xiii.) In other words, intensities are *events* described in terms of energy.

<sup>119</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p.42.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p.104.

<sup>121</sup> Nouvet, “The Inarticulate Affect: Lyotard and Psychoanalytic Testimony”, in Nouvet, Stahuljak and Still (eds.), *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, p.116-117, and Lyotard, *Misère de la philosophie*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 2000, p.74.

<sup>122</sup> See for instance the introduction to Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*.

<sup>123</sup> The transition from *Discours, figure* to *Économie libidinale*, in terms of Lyotard’s aversion to a perceived “psychoanalytic Hegelianism” is nicely summed up by Gualandi in *Lyotard*, p.55-56.

much of Freud's very clear and public bracketing of belief in the reality or even the theoretical validity of those posits.<sup>124</sup> Freud is in fact largely agnostic, or rather, "apathetic"<sup>125</sup> towards such questions, citing an intuition that he believes is "the product of a kind of intellectual impartiality".<sup>126</sup> He is therefore exemplary of a Lyotardian methodological materialism that seeks answers to its questions only in the material at hand, but which posits those answers in full knowledge that they are provisional, built as they are on intrinsically and therefore unavoidably shaky ground. Lyotard may thus cite Freud as a fellow methodological materialist, but one working in the domain of psychoanalysis.

This leads me to my second point. It will become clearer as we progress that one of Lyotard's longstanding tactics is to bolster his philosophy of the event by citing a number of important philosophers, psychoanalysts, scientists and artists as essentially agreeing with his basic methodological thrust.<sup>127</sup> Even where they employ different arguments and theoretical terms, and even where these seem incompatible,<sup>128</sup> Lyotard nonetheless borrows from and in some cases subverts them<sup>129</sup> to speak his philosophy of the event in a patchwork of different languages.<sup>130</sup> Like Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he invariably adopts a stance of agnosticism with regard to the truth and theoretical efficacy of such arguments and terms, even where this runs him into performative contradiction.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p.102-105.

<sup>125</sup> Lyotard analyzes Freud's theoretical apathy regarding his posits at length in "Apathie dans la théorie", the first chapter of *Rudiments païens*.

<sup>126</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p.104.

<sup>127</sup> Williams makes a similar point in *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*, p.24-25. He calls Lyotard a strategic "plunderer" of the history of philosophy.

<sup>128</sup> For instance, as will be further explored in Chapter 3, in *Heidegger et "les juifs"*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1988, Lyotard cites both Freud's theory of *Nachträglichkeit* or primary repression and Kant's analytic of the sublime as similar in decisive respects, and in support of his own position. Since Freud and Kant are so different *prima facie*, this is not an uncontroversial move.

<sup>129</sup> We will see later that this is especially true of Lyotard's readings of Kant and Augustine.

<sup>130</sup> If this move seems bizarre, consider Feyerabend on Galileo in *Against Method*, London and New York, Verso, 2002.

<sup>131</sup> In the wake of *Économie libidinale*, Lyotard makes his agnosticism with regard to the ontological status of Freudian categories explicit with the phrase "il y a des énergies (façon de parler)" – that is, "there are energies (but this is a way of speaking)" (Lyotard, *Rudiments païens*, p.130.). This perhaps saves Lyotard from the charge that he is setting up a new nihilating transcendence by positing a metaphysics of polymorphous, janus-faced desire; nonetheless, it is irksome to detractors who expect theoreticians to believe in the reality or at least theoretical viability of their terms and categories.

Lyotard's borrowing from Freud is certainly far from orthodox; as we will see later, he departs from him in refusing to assume a privileged locus of the intensity, or desire-event, such as the phenomenological body, the "social body", or, as with certain Freudo-Marxists, the working class. He thus also seems in his interpretation of Freud to approach a more radical philosophy of the event than he had attempted to formulate in his phenomenological/Marxist phase. By adopting Freud's distinction between primary and secondary processes, Lyotard has found a fresh way to articulate his philosophy of the event: the primary flow of energy is an inarticulate process of both creating and destroying, erupting in singular ways, i.e. as intensities, whereas secondary process belongs to (which is to say that it engenders and is engendered by) a meaningful, articulate, legible reality that nihilates (in the sense of only partially grasping or accounting for) primary flows or intensities in capturing and productively channelling them. Such a scenario describes no less than the singular in its relation to nihilating transcendence.

It must be driven home however that Lyotard does not mark a strictly oppositional distinction between primary and secondary process. Nor does he wish, as one might expect, to claim to go over to the side of primary process, *tout court*. As he puts it in *Discours, figure*, "On ne peut pas passer du côté du processus primaire: c'est une illusion secondaire. Le désir a son rejet en lui-même ... Le désir est vraiment inacceptable, on ne peut pas faire semblant de l'accepter, l'accepter est encore le rejeter, il fera événement ailleurs."<sup>132</sup> ("We cannot pass over to the side of primary process: it's<sup>133</sup> an illusion of secondary process. Desire's rejection lies in itself ... Desire is really unacceptable, we cannot pretend as though we accept it, accepting it is still rejecting it, desire's event is elsewhere.") Really there is only desire; primary and secondary processes are impossible aspects of desire. Irrespective of their logical impossibility, however, in a manner of speaking desire as event and/or structure runs them together or co-presents them – in terms of secondary elaboration – *as if* they were compossible. Think of a particularly heavy, gloppy brushstroke on a canvas. It might betray the existence of the

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<sup>132</sup> Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, p.23.

<sup>133</sup> "It" could mean here either primary process, or the possibility of passing over to primary process. Either meaning works: either secondary process creates the illusion that there is an ontologically distinct primary process, or it creates the illusion that one could side with it somehow.

paint and canvas partially constituting the painting, disrupting thereby the purely figurative space of the painting's aesthetic economy with the suggestion of a textured, material, tactile space "below". The painting would thereby betray two compossible-impossible spaces, neither of which would be "truer" than the other, strictly speaking, since both together constitute the painting.

In *Discours, figure*, generally considered to be one of Lyotard's most important if difficult works, we can see this Freudian reading of compossible-impossible spaces in action. What Lyotard calls *the figural* "arises as the co-existence of incommensurable or heterogeneous spaces, of the figurative in the textual or the textual in the figurative, for example".<sup>134</sup> The figural signals (but does not signify),<sup>135</sup> for example,<sup>136</sup> how primary process erupts from within and thus distorts or disrupts the structures comprising discourse, or secondary process in "figurative and textual space".<sup>137</sup> On the definition of the figural (as well as of discourse), it is worth quoting Bill Readings at length:

...discourse is the name given by Lyotard to the process of *representation by concepts* ... the rule of discourse is thus the claim to order being as a structure of meanings, to identify existence with the representable by the establishment of the exclusive rule of a network of oppositions between concepts or signifiers. Against the rule of discourse in figurative and textual space, Lyotard insists upon the figural. It is crucial to understand that the figural is not simply opposed to the discursive, as another kind of space. Lyotard is not making a romantic claim that irrationality is better than reason, that desire is better than understanding. If the rule of discourse is primarily the rule of representation by conceptual *oppositions*, the figural cannot simply be opposed to the discursive. Rather, the figural opens discourse to a radical heterogeneity, a singularity, a difference which cannot be rationalized or subsumed within the rule of representation ... the figural marks this resistance, the sense that we cannot 'say' everything about an object, that an object always in some sense remains 'other' to any discourse we may maintain about it, has a singularity in excess of any meanings we may assign to it...<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, London and New York, Routledge, 1991, p.4.

<sup>135</sup> Insofar as the positing of the signifier over the signified enacts the relation of nihilating transcendence that Lyotard wishes to avoid, he must adopt a terminology of signals, indexes and the like. Against the nihilism of semiotics, he wishes to articulate that something may wish to show itself but not succeed in doing so; as we will see later, rather than signification, a clear presentation of something by a sign, Lyotard is here concerned with the possibility of *negative* presentation (Kant's term), the unclear, allusive presentation that-there-is (without stating what-there-is).

<sup>136</sup> See Gualandi, *Lyotard*, p.48-50, for a helpful breakdown of Lyotard's more refined, tripartite definition of the figural into *figure-image*, *figure-forme* and *figure-matrice*.

<sup>137</sup> Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, p.4.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3-4.

The figural is that which, in representation, makes us aware that there is something that cannot be represented, an other to representation. In this respect it is like the *immemorial*, that which cannot be remembered (made the object of a present representation) but cannot be forgotten either.<sup>139</sup>

Lyotard's text "moves from the visible to the unconscious in its defence of the figural";<sup>140</sup> in a manner of speaking, it employs phenomenological tools to critique structuralism but then employs psychoanalytical tools to critique phenomenology.<sup>141</sup>

The intellectual context of *Discours, figure* helps put this strategy in perspective. At the time, French structuralism was still hegemonic but losing ground. According to structuralism, the human mind (Lacan) and human social mores and societies (Lévi-Strauss) were to be read as analogues of languages in the precise sense put down by Ferdinand de Saussure<sup>142</sup> as possessing both syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions that together constitute a fabric of meaning. Accordingly, *Discours, figure* is rightly considered a *post-structuralist*<sup>143</sup> text to the extent that Lyotard seeks therein to complicate such readings of "structures" as well-ordered languages by means of the Freudian notion of a primary process of desire working "below" or "inside" of them, constituting them, but tending always to disrupt and distort them. An important aim of *Discours, figure* is, in short, to attack structuralism by partially excavating from its seemingly well-ordered structures that which both underpins and overflows them with singular richness.<sup>144</sup> But to the extent that phenomenology is also prisoner to the nihilating logic of Western philosophy, it, too, is submitted to an attack. Returning to the above example, the eruption of colour one finds in the brushstrokes of a canvas by Cézanne is said by Lyotard to overflow the work's compositional pictorial elements in a way that neither structuralism nor phenomenology can properly grasp.<sup>145</sup> Similarly, one

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<sup>139</sup> Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, p.22.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45.

<sup>141</sup> Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, p.20.

<sup>142</sup> See Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, London, Owen, 1959.

<sup>143</sup> Peter Dews situates Lyotard more precisely with regard to structuralism and post-structuralism in the fourth chapter of *Logics of Disintegration*.

<sup>144</sup> Another way of characterizing figure is that for Lyotard, primary process leaves "traces" of its work in secondary elaboration (Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, p.167-169).

<sup>145</sup> From the opening pages of *Discours, figure* until late in his career, Cézanne is a favourite example of Lyotard's.

can imagine the institution of the university prior to May 68 as bubbling with the desire that will soon overflow the institution and constitute its radical questioning.

In drawing from Freud's distinction between primary and secondary process, Lyotard's notion of the figural appears to be consistent with what I have labelled his methodological materialism. It obviously seeks to save the singularity of the event from transcendent, nihilating structures. "Structuralism" is only the most obvious target here, because of its fortuitous name and its nihilating-transcendent theoretical content. But it should be remembered that Lyotard will combat nihilating transcendence *wherever* he detects it. The notion of "reality" itself eventually becomes his target, insofar as it figures as an expression of nihilating transcendence and carries with it certain political stakes. Here again, Lyotard will draw upon Freud.

Giving a negative definition of the figural, Lyotard invokes the notion of reality that he argues runs through all of Freud's work:<sup>146</sup> "un ensemble lié de perceptions vérifiables par des activités de transformation, et aussi signifiables par des ensembles liés de mots, c'est-à-dire, verbalisables"<sup>147</sup> ("a collection of perceptions that are testable against each other, as well as testable by means of practical activity, and that are also able to be put into language"). Lyotard notes that for Freud, at bottom, the criteria of reality are criteria of communication.<sup>148</sup> To paraphrase Lyotard, objects are "real" in the Freudian sense to the extent that they can be communicated at two levels: that of language, and that of practice.<sup>149</sup> Lyotard notes that this makes Freudian reality a notion that is deeply social; but more importantly, it is a notion that is always to be taken in scare-quotes.<sup>150</sup>

The linked, communicable ensemble of perceptions constituting Freudian reality is in fact quite skeletal, shot through with holes: that is, with that which cannot be communicated about perceptions and affects.<sup>151</sup> Freudian reality is, in short, only a stark and impoverished picture of the actual manifold of experience and, considered more generally, of what-there-is. One can speak of a "Freudian utopia" in the strict sense of the

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<sup>146</sup> Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, p.230.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p.231

term “utopia”: a rich, unaccountable *non-place*, a place that is not a place, because it cannot be located, and which is always indicated by the place that actually gets spoken in communication.<sup>152</sup> The figural is that which erupts in the thin framework of Freudian reality, indicating but not communicating or directly showing this non-place. Put inelegantly, the figural is the singularity or the event-ness of the particular event, felt or experienced as an inarticulate trace (i.e. experienced as an affect). And as we saw, Freud himself provides the very conceptual tools to conceive of the figure in his notion of primary (for lack of a better term, “true”)<sup>153</sup> as opposed to secondary (“communicative-real”) process. By drawing on Freud in this manner, Lyotard seeks support for his claim that transcendent structures of meaning are but thin, impoverished veneers imposed upon a much deeper process of permanent becoming.

I made reference above to the political stakes of Lyotard’s attack on the notion of “reality”. It must be kept in mind that what interests Lyotard in his turn to Freud can also be tied to a social fact that is at the same time to be furthered as a practical aim: the unprecedented phenomenon of political revolt by the affluent young, in many cases with no traditional aim or transcendent structure of political criticism in mind. In short: a politics of the event, a politics consistent with Lyotard’s methodological materialism. I say that this is a “social fact” as well as a practical aim because for Lyotard, May 68 and the March 22 Movement,<sup>154</sup> social facts, resonated deeply with and went on to further inform his philosophy. The task for Lyotard, faced with such social facts, was to articulate, without domesticating,<sup>155</sup> and, if possible, to foment such “evental” political interventions.

This can be explained as follows. There is “modern politics”, in the sense of contesting the state of a field of discourse / communication / representation: in Freudian

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<sup>152</sup> Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, p.229

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p.167: “Il y a, dans l’oeuvre de Freud, un langage de savoir et il y a un travail de vérité ... La vérité *ne parle pas, stricto sensu*; elle travaille. La connaissance parle, elle appartient à la distance, à la rupture avec la chose, que le discours exige.” Roughly: “There is, in Freud’s work, a language of knowledge [corresponding to secondary process] and a work of truth [corresponding to primary process] ... Truth *doesn’t speak, in the strict sense*; it works. Knowledge speaks, it belongs to the distance, to the rupture with the thing, that discourse demands.”

<sup>154</sup> In the words of Dews, the March 22 Movement (Mouvement du 22 Mars) was “the spontaneist, anti-authoritarian wing of the May [68] movement.” (*Logics of Disintegration*, p.111).

<sup>155</sup> See especially *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, p.305-316: how does one “give an account” of the March 22 Movement that does not thereby incorporate it into a nihilating system of transcendence?

terms, politics in the sense of contesting an actual state of reality, usually in the name of a counterfactual state of reality that is claimed to be more just or in some other way superior. There are two broadly-construed ways of doing this. An example of contesting the given state of reality by *reform* would be by working with or on behalf of, or simply voting for, a certain contender for parliament, or even to gain office as a member of parliament oneself, so as to change how things are run; one thinks for instance of right-wing populist tickets based on “lowering taxes” or “cleaning up corruption”, both of which contest a particular state of reality in the name of another, counterfactual state of reality that is purportedly better. Contesting the state of reality by *revolution*, by contrast, could involve seizing or overthrowing the state, as in the Leninist strategy; in other words, instituting a new order from above. Contrarily, revolution could follow the anarchist strategy of simply smashing the state *tout court*, or at least rendering it irrelevant so as to institute and carry out politics direct-democratically, from below. At both ends of the revolutionary spectrum, the aim is still to change the given state of reality to a preferred, counterfactual state of reality. Thus under “modern politics” we have reform and revolution as means of changing a given state of reality to a preferred state of reality.

But reality in the Freudian sense, as we saw, is only the barest skeleton of the given, which is to say of the material at hand. If this account of reality is compelling, one can question how much all such “modern” political moves and strategies, as matters of communication between persons and interests, i.e. representations, actually link up to or “express” both the underlying primary process as well as to the lived experiences and, to use a loaded term, deeper natures of individual political actors. For Lyotard, in addition to politics in the reformist and revolutionary senses of contestation of the given state of reality, conceived in representational terms, there is politics, more precisely *a-politics*,<sup>156</sup> as the *contestation of the very field of representation itself*. In the Freudian terms employed here, this would be politics as *the contestation of reality as such*. The a-politics of Lyotard’s position is therefore not the taking or dissolving of power, a given *state* of

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<sup>156</sup> The introduction to Lyotard’s *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* (translated as “Adrift” in *Driftworks*) admirably captures this rejection of reformatory and revolutionary politics as such, and the adoption of a stance that is activist, but not political or of the order of the political, “pas politique”. See also p. 202-209 of the same text.

reality, by reformist or revolutionary means. Rather, it is the thoroughgoing rejection of politics as constituting a field of representation and therefore, of meaningful action. Such an a-politics, in outline, accords with Lyotard's methodological materialism, i.e. his philosophy of the event. But it also describes, for Lyotard, what was genuinely novel about the protests of May 68 and the March 22<sup>nd</sup> movement.

Where then does all of this lead? In broad brush strokes, 1974's *Économie libidinale* is Lyotard's culminating attempt to re-think politics in light of what he identifies, and wishes to conceive, as this rejection of the political as a field of representation that was at the bottom of May '68 and the March 22<sup>nd</sup> movement. The preparatory work is carried out from *Discours, figure* to *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* and *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*. But it is in the developed notion of libidinal economy that Lyotard attempts to definitively break with transcendence and articulate an a-politics that would serve as the activist counterpart to this break.

The basic operation undertaken by Lyotard in *Économie libidinale* is to conceive of events and transcendent structures in terms of the Freudian distinction between primary and secondary processes, thereby conceptualizing the material at hand, *including transcendent, nihilating structures*, as a monistic substance with at least two seemingly impossible aspects – one creative-domesticating, and one destructive-liberating. Lyotard is adamant that secondary processes, constituting the *dispositifs*<sup>157</sup> that capture and productively recuperate primary flows, are themselves nothing but accretions of primary flows, existing on the same monistic surface of libidinal energy, as unbounded primary intensities / singularities, and that moreover, primary flows are ambiguous in their creative (Eros) and destructive (death drive) effects. This means that even the most rigid institution, tradition, etc., is pregnant with its own dissolution, and that the most radical, anarchical social movement carries the seeds of its own co-optation and ossification.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Iain Hamilton Grant argues that the conventional English rendering of *dispositif* as “set-up” or “apparatus” gives “a somewhat mechanistic picture of Lyotard's efforts” (in Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.x). This picture is out of step with Lyotard's description of *dispositifs* as *dissimulating* the primary flows/intensities that both constitute and undermine them.

<sup>158</sup> Deleuze and Guattari make a similar point in their discussion of the rhizomatic and the arboreal. See *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2005, p. 9-10, 34.

This of course gives only the broadest sense of the “metaphysics”<sup>159</sup> of *Économie libidinale*, which deserves a more detailed elaboration. In the first chapter of the text, Lyotard invites the reader, imaginatively, to “[o]pen the so-called body and spread out all its surfaces”.<sup>160</sup> This is to render in imagination the “so-called body” – certainly *any* supposed organic unity that could be characterized as an economy of energy, from the individual human body to the particular social institution to society itself – a polymorphous, monoface<sup>161</sup> band whereupon primary flows by turns course freely and fold in on themselves, creating topological irregularities, i.e. *dispositifs*, and capturing further flows in doing so. Such an operation harkens back to the Freud of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, wherein is posited, recall, the “polymorphous perversity” (diversity) of the infant body, which is to say the body upon which the distribution of desire on (and for) the genitals – precisely, the capturing of primary process in secondary structures or *dispositifs* of “well-adjusted” sexuality – has not yet taken place, but will take place as the social/physical world impinges upon the infant.

The libidinal band is precisely this monistic, polymorphous surface of flowing and accreting desire that is the infant body. But it is also the adult body, insofar as its energies have been accreted in and around *dispositifs* or secondary process. Lyotard’s point is to give an account of energy economies couched in terms of a single substance, primary desire, which is at the same time creative and destructive, cooling and heating, domesticating and freeing, etc. – and to thereby suggest that the seeds of personal or

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<sup>159</sup> The Lyotard of *Économie libidinale* would of course reject this designation, since metaphysics, i.e. nihilistic religiosity, is in fact his target. But as we will see below, there is a tension in *Économie libidinale* between the positing of a world picture implicitly privileging the event, and the fact that the singularity and richness of the event would seem to rule out such a world picture. It is perhaps possible to call the picture given in *Économie libidinale* a “fabular” metaphysics – a world-picture that is self-consciously a story or a ruse. Bear in mind here the Nietzschean inspiration of the text, which, according to Dews, “illustrates – perhaps more clearly than any other post-structuralist text – the fundamental dynamic of the [French intellectual] shift towards Nietzsche in the 1970s” (Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*, p.216.).

<sup>160</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.1 [9].

<sup>161</sup> Recall that for Freud, the infant’s desire, operating without structures of meaning, literally *knows* no exterior (Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, p.49-50, 99.). The same then can be said of primary process generally. Lyotard suggests as much when he asks his readers to add to the opened up, spread out body, all of the qualia corresponding to the sense organs (Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.2 [10]). For Lyotard, the colour red literally constitutes a region on the libidinal band; it is not “outside” of the so-called body’s (so-called?) retinas, but is actually a part of them. Desire as primary process, in sum, knows no distinction between interior and exterior.

social revolt do not lie in something outside of the material at hand, some “subversive region” or critical position.<sup>162</sup>

The seeds of revolt are rather immanent to the libidinal economy itself, since the energies that are seemingly “trapped” in *dispositifs* or secondary processes – for instance, those “trapped” in hetero-normed sexualities, religious and secular institutions, etc. – are Thanatos dissimulated in/as Eros, and as such need only be ignited, “conducted”,<sup>163</sup> accelerated. In this way, the French university as a social institution could collapse into a molecular multiplicity of teach-ins, destructive actions, creative and “utopian” initiatives and exchanges, etc, largely without the approval or initiative of the “critical” vantage point claimed by French Marxism.<sup>164</sup> Lyotard’s point is that the energies released in such a collapse, which was at the same time a creative transformation, were immanent to the institution and the broader social field. What remains of politics for the Lyotard of *Économie libidinale* is therefore not to install a new, more just personal or political regime,<sup>165</sup> but to ignite energies frozen into norms and institutions so that they can do their potential creative / destructive work in the greatest possible freedom to the greatest possible effect. This then is Lyotard’s response to May 68, Nanterre, etc. – a program of fomenting many more such singular eruptions by working *within* and *on* the social as given, on the understanding that it is shot through and underpinned by primary process.

This strategic position obviously puts Lyotard at variance with his erstwhile Marxist contemporaries, perhaps even the most radical ones.<sup>166</sup> But it should also be noted that for the Lyotard of *Économie libidinale*, capitalism takes on an almost altogether different status than it receives as an “object”, however polymorphous and vague, of Marxist critique. Rather than repeating the Marxist line of inferring capitalism’s collapse from the combination of immiseration and militant socialization of labour that it

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<sup>162</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.103 [126] and 3 [11].

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, p.262 [311].

<sup>164</sup> Excepting of course the Situationists, insofar as they were (heterodox, ultra-Left) Marxists. A good deal of Lyotard’s *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* is devoted to attacking French Marxist groups and “groupuscules” for taking the sort of “critical” viewpoint that he had come to reject as belonging to structures of nihilistic religiosity, as well as for proving reactionary during May 68 and after.

<sup>165</sup> “...we have superseded nothing and we have nothing to supersede ...” (Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.104 [127].

<sup>166</sup> Guy Debord: “... Lyotard, and other crumb-grubbers – people who had already shot their bolt more than fifteen years ago without managing to particularly dazzle their century.” (Debord, *Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works*, Oakland and Edinburgh, AK Press, 2003, p.126.)

necessarily engenders, Lyotard questions whether there is in fact such a “natural” limit to its expansion. The context of this suspicion is the same that produced Situationism and the critical theory of Marcuse – both of which severely criticized the notion of an automatic fatal crisis in capitalism, and sought unanticipated economic as well as “superstructural”<sup>167</sup> causes for the inertia of the proletariat in advanced capitalist countries.<sup>168</sup> But whereas Marcuse and the Situationists nonetheless followed a Left-Hegelian strategy of attempting to articulate and foment the negation of the given society, Lyotard, in line with his methodological materialism, sought rather to ignite and accelerate certain existing tendencies of the given society without, as far as possible, offering any comment on how those tendencies should play themselves out once they have been set in motion.

Suspecting that capitalism is more tenacious than classical Marxism gives it credit for – and we will see that for the later Lyotard, the only plausible limit to capitalism and its expression as technological development is the longevity of the very solar system<sup>169</sup> – Lyotard will venture that the “correct” strategy (to the extent that he would actually admit to be making valid normative claims) is not to critique capitalism, but rather, as with all structures and processes, to “be inside and forget it”;<sup>170</sup> precisely, to proceed in the way that primary process does when it creates, destroys, and in any case distorts: without thinking otherwise, which is to say, without critiquing.<sup>171</sup>

This means, in practical terms, an ambiguous and provocative<sup>172</sup> flirtation with capitalism, insofar as the latter mirrors the blind striving of primary process; i.e. a celebration and mimicking of its “*dispositif* of conquest”, and hence, its “*dispositif of the regulation of conquest*”, which is to say the *dispositif* by which it makes conquest

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<sup>167</sup> The scare-quotes indicate my well-founded suspicion of a crude dualism of base and superstructure.

<sup>168</sup> See, for example, Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, New York, Zone Books, 1995, and Marcuse’s *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1972.

<sup>169</sup> See “Can Thought go on Without a Body?” in Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, and “A Postmodern Fable” in Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 2003.

<sup>170</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.3 [11].

<sup>171</sup> “Work as the sun does when you’re sunbathing or taking grass.” (Ibid., p.1 [10].)

<sup>172</sup> “... we must put a stop to the critique of capital ... we must take note of, examine, exalt the incredible, unspeakable pulsional possibilities that it sets rolling ... Let’s replace the term critique by an attitude closer to what we effectively experience in our current relations with capital ... that is to say a horrified fascination for the entire range of the *dispositifs of jouissance*.” (Ibid., p.140 [170-171].)

permanent.<sup>173</sup> But it also means an attack on that in capitalism which tends towards the ossification of its energies in stable or moribund economic corporations or bureaucratic societies. This coincides, however, with an abandonment of politics, revolutionary or otherwise, as was previously noted; moreover, it runs up against the problem of performative contradiction. Lyotard himself will later admit that what the Leftist academics of our time often read as the “anticapitalism” of *Économie libidinale* is actually “quite broadly a philosophy of capital” that Lyotard would have liked to have seen “work within capital, so as to make it appear as an affirmative force.”<sup>174</sup> Exactly this kind of attitude, of course, had the effect of “losing Lyotard many [more] Marxist friends”.<sup>175</sup> It is in any case continuous with a sustained attempt to understand capitalism, and differently than the Marxist canon, to which also belong both volumes of Deleuze and Guattari’s *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, and other documents of what Ferry and Renaut will call “la pensée 68”. Lyotard’s text is not, therefore, that much of an anomaly. It rather belongs to what appeared at the time as an anomalous, emergent intellectual tradition.

What then of the problem, mentioned in section 1.1a, of Lyotard’s methodological materialism running into performative contradiction? How is it dealt with in *Économie libidinale*? Recall that previously, I asserted that Marxism became for the early Lyotard more of a critical theory than a detailed positive program or social model. The basic framework of the mature libidinal philosophy is notable because it rejects even the pretension to be such a theory. In the libidinal philosophy, Lyotard repeatedly emphasizes that he is not doing critique – that critique is itself only a moment of transcendent nihilation, wherein the margins of “reality”, in terms of Freudian secondary process, or *dispositif*, are invested to problematize that purported reality’s centre, thereby changing it, rendering it more inclusive, more “real”.

Lyotard has therefore attempted to escape the problem of performative contradiction indicated in section 1.1 by abandoning the claim to be doing critique. This means that his libidinal philosophy is at bottom rhetorical, but at the limit of what is usually meant by the term; that is, rhetoric not as a more or less well-defined system of

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<sup>173</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.154 [187-188].

<sup>174</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p.90 [188].

<sup>175</sup> Iain Hamilton Grant in Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.xviii.

persuasive moves within a more or less well-defined field of discourse with particular stakes (persuading the addressee to agree with a particular side of a debate, etc.), but rather as force meant to *radically* disturb, seduce, frighten, arouse, etc. – and emphatically *not* from a vantage point that is considered to be “more true”, “more real” or so on, but rather one that is merely willed by Lyotard himself (or the energies that will through him).<sup>176</sup> In this way *Économie libidinale* is a textual equivalent to May 68, which is to say an event in the specifically (a-)political sense:<sup>177</sup> that which thaws or conducts energy constituting the existing *dispositifs* at work in and constituting the social system, with a view to traumatizing that system, diverting its energies from their usual circuits, disrupting it. While it would be an exaggeration to say that *Économie libidinale* itself caused widespread social change,<sup>178</sup> it does belong to a stream of similar discourses that became influential in the 1970s and have perhaps had lasting effects down to the present day.<sup>179</sup>

To the extent that Lyotard’s own “authorial”<sup>180</sup> energies nonetheless find themselves throughout *Économie libidinale* operating by way of the *dispositif* of philosophical argumentation and the advancement of truth-claims, note that the given system itself, whether body, text, institution or society, can be described as a web of *dispositifs* (or *dispositifs* within *dispositifs*), all capturing and regulating further energy, and that nonetheless – witness May 68 – “new” or at least unexpected flows of energy, at once Eros and death drive accreted in *dispositifs*, may be set in motion to disrupt the

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<sup>176</sup> Lyotard does give a reason, besides willing, to recommend such an exercise. He states that any text that does not provoke in a radical way risks “digestion”, i.e. recuperation, by the system it attacks. (Lyotard, *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*, p.159.)

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p.311.

<sup>178</sup> Lyotard notes the mixture of hostility, incomprehension and critical silence that greeted *Économie libidinale*: “The readers of this book ... generally accepted [it] as a rhetorical exercise... Its rare readers disliked the book, which passed for a piece of shamelessness, immodesty and provocation.” (Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1988, p.14 [33-34].)

<sup>179</sup> As mentioned, it is especially plausible to relate Lyotard’s works of this period to those of Deleuze and Guattari, which have been and continue to be fairly influential. It is this intellectual stream of antihumanist radicalism which Ferry and Renault dub “la pensée 68” (“May 68 thought”; Ferry and Renault are perhaps playing on “la pensée Mao Tse-Tung”, “Mao Tse-Tung thought”, a term that was current in the 60s and 70s, thereby painting Lyotard’s “tradition” as dangerous and encouraging a certain authoritarianism, fanaticism and blind devotion).

<sup>180</sup> Lyotard resists claiming or being granted full authorial privilege over the meaning of his works, on the grounds that the “author” is generally viewed to be a transcendent, god-like and nihilating posit. I mean here to refer to the energies that “Lyotard” (as a radically singular accretion of energy flows) conducts in the writing of “his” text.

system from within. It bears reiterating that for Lyotard there is no “subversive region” outside of the capitalist-bureaucratic system from which the energy is to come. Rather, as in the cases of libidinal politics cited by Lyotard, energy can be agitated or touched off in any of the system’s *dispositifs*. It is a legitimate question whether the human body, as polymorphous libidinal band dissimulated as *dispositif*, because it is a more minor but also more or less socially circulating *dispositif*, does not constitute a tactically important locus of ignition. If it does, then Lyotard’s role as philosophy instructor and its relation to his role in organizing students at Nanterre during May 68 can be seen in a new light. Lyotard could be seen on this reading as conducting energies to ignite student-*dispositifs* at the very heart of the university-*dispositif*, so as to undermine and open up the latter to further, more intense flows of energy.

From a certain perspective then, it does not matter to Lyotard that he performs a good many of the propositions contained in *Économie libidinale* as if they were true: to do so is exactly the point, insofar as doing so causes certain effects. Throughout key places in the text, he employs a *dispositif* of rational argumentation to more easily introduce disruptive, more or less free-flowing energies to his readers, thereby unsettling the energies accreted in/as his readers – to touch them and thereby touch them off, so to speak. Granted, this gives a strange quality to the text, because the energies it designates, and which inhabit it, ultimately outstrip the arguments that it makes about them. If Lyotard were to proceed by way of calm argumentation and truth-claims alone, his work could be simply passed off as poor or illogical – as we saw in section 1.1, his methodological materialism is caught between two inconsistent, inadequate justifications. But he appears to be well aware of this danger, and therefore presents his readers with a text shot through with sex, violence, profanity, polemic, literary flourish, etc. – the idea being, in a manner of speaking, to forcefully and seductively *show*, by whatever means happen to work relative to a particular reader, what Lyotard cannot with logical consistency *say*.<sup>181</sup> If one can get past its apparent impenetrability and pretentiousness, *Économie libidinale*, when judged fairly, is both a weak text to the extent that it employs methodologically inconsistent seduction tactics, and a powerful one, for the very same

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<sup>181</sup> Recall here the early Wittgenstein’s assessment of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: it similarly *shows* what it cannot *say*.

reason. Though it may not hold up to rational scrutiny, the polymorphous nature of the text perhaps renders it capable of touching off and seducing heterogeneous desires in the same reader.

This disposes of the seemingly fatal problem of performative contradiction to the extent that Lyotard's philosophy is attuned to flows/intensities which cannot be captured by the *dispositif* of *logically sound cognitive language itself*; if his libidinal rhetoric is sufficiently seductive, then his audience should come to strongly suspect that the genre of logically sound cognitive language taking him to task for performative contradiction is, in a sense, begging the question against him by assuming that everything is within its purview. But as previously noted, this strategy only goes so far, because it does not defeat rational discourse on its own ground, gesturing rather to a beyond that it cannot properly articulate without falling into inconsistency.

The reader however will perhaps have anticipated an altogether different problem here, to be treated in detail below: in resorting to seductive force, Lyotard has cut himself off from the ability to ground normative claims with consistency. More specifically, in conceiving of the given as libidinal energy flowing and accreting, Lyotard is unable or at least without an obvious method of consistently grounding two important claims. First, there is the claim that flowing energy is better than accreted energy (i.e. the claim that events/flows/intensities are better than nihilating, transcendent structures, even where these are accreted, cooled and captured events, i.e. *dispositifs*). Granted, Lyotard does not claim to *ground* this claim, much less make it;<sup>182</sup> rather, he simply attempts to *seduce* his reader into believing it. But his rhetoric can always fail here: the reader might be unmoved, or reject it, or even fight it with a similar rhetoric that privileges secondary process or even a substance dualism or pluralism. With Lyotard's strategy in mind, for him to apply standards of logical consistency to his opponents in the latter case would of course constitute a performative contradiction, and could only make sense as a further rhetorical move. As such he is able to attempt to seduce, and attempt again if he fails; but by his own admission there is no higher standard by which to settle the question of whether flow or accretion is superior.

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<sup>182</sup> Lyotard claims *not* to subscribe to a Spinozist/Nietzschean view that would make normative claims on quantitative energetic grounds; in other words, he seems to suggest that the only basis for his rhetorical thrust is his will (*Libidinal Economy*, p.42 [54-55].).

It is perhaps more problematic that Lyotard cannot by any obvious means ground a second normative claim: the claim that individual human beings, themselves libidinal bands dissimulated as *dispositifs* on the wider, social libidinal band, which is to say tangles of primary and secondary desire, are of any intrinsic or even relative worth. It does not follow from the claim that all events and structures are functions of desire that those (ambiguous, to be sure) events / structures called humans hold any kind of pre-eminence in the monistic universe Lyotard describes.

The problem here is essentially that of antihumanism and its ethical status. This will be the topic of the next two sections, in which I first trace the development of a peculiar antihumanism alongside Lyotard's methodological materialism, and then proceed to critique said antihumanism.

## **1.2 – The Development of Antihumanism from *La phénoménologie* to *Économie libidinale***

Summarizing the argument so far, we have seen that from his first book on phenomenology in 1954, to the libidinal philosophy of the early 70s, Lyotard consistently sought to privilege the “material” of his analyses, respecting and drawing attention to the way its constitutive opacity haunts and problematizes the transcendent structures that are supposed to order and account for it. Rendered differently, Lyotard sought to let the event orient and, by the time of the libidinal writings, ultimately trump theory, rather than the other way around. His commitment to this methodological materialism was variously expressed, not always comfortably, in the development of his early thought; phenomenology, though given a place of honour, was subordinated to the supposedly richer methodological framework of Marxism, which in turn proved uncomfortably “nihilitating” when it came to description of a material enriched by the insights of Freudian meta-psychology. What remains to be established in the present section is how and why such a variously expressed methodological commitment ultimately produced a specifically *antihumanist* theory. The generation of Lyotard's libidinal antihumanism will therefore presently be read as a function of the development of his methodological materialism.

At the broadest level of analysis, thoroughgoing methodological materialism, faithfulness to the singularity of the event, rules out allegiance to “the human” as a transcendent principle. This is because insofar as the human is transcendent, it is always ready to nihilate individual humans. The defence of singularity rules out humanism, insofar as the latter conceives of the human as an essentialist/organic or eschatological and hence, nihilating principle.

Accordingly, just as Lyotard’s early writings contain something of a hesitation, or at least an uneasy alliance between radical methodological materialism and the rational, historical framework of Marxism, they also betray a hesitation over the status of the human. We saw that for the early Lyotard, “The value of phenomenology...lies in its effort to recover humanity itself, beneath any objectivist schema, which the human sciences can never recover”.<sup>183</sup> Thus in his first book, Lyotard appears to adopt a humanist position: in turning to phenomenology, he points to a way of uncovering a core of human freedom, thereby dispelling from Marxism a vulgar determinism that is fed by deterministic currents and purported advances in the human sciences. Such a move is perhaps doubly humanist, in the sense that it endeavours by special tools to keep the human, or “humanity itself”, at the forefront of Marxism, already nominally, at least, a humanistic theoretical framework and project.<sup>184</sup>

The seemingly humanistic language of *La phénoménologie*’s final section is, however, irreducible to the dominant, grossly nihilating-transcendent humanisms of the time (notably, Stalinist humanism). The particular way in which Lyotard employs the term “human”, along with his estimation of phenomenology as (in part, or from a certain perspective) an uncovering of the constitutively human, seems to suggest that the human is neither a fixed essence, nor a becoming with a particular, historically fixed end-point (such as would be the case in a deterministic form of Marxism). Rather, the human seems to be the site of a potentially productive but nonetheless permanent questioning or relative uncertainty. As Lyotard writes, having put forth his argument for a Marxism

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<sup>183</sup> Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, p.136 [125].

<sup>184</sup> Recall that the time of publication is 1954: in France, where Marxism still exerted a strong influence, the question of preserving and emphasizing the role played in it by human freedom was very much at issue. It is also of interest to compare this early position of Lyotard’s with the work of Louis Althusser, who by contrast would attempt to show Marxism to be a resolutely antihumanist theory allowing, nonetheless, for a practical humanism.

enriched by but ultimately sublating<sup>185</sup> phenomenology, there is “no greater task for philosophy” than to understand history; however, there is also “never a total understanding of history”.<sup>186</sup> He goes on to say that “[b]ecause history is never completed – that is, because it is human – it is not a specifiable object; but precisely because it is human, history is not meaningless”.<sup>187</sup> Note that the attack on nihilating totality familiar to readers of the later Lyotard is already present. But what, then, should be made of the term “human” as it is employed in the above passage? On the one hand, the human is put forth as the source or locus of meaning in history, and this, of course, smacks of humanism. But on the other hand, the human is also cast as something that is “never completed”.

Such a view, then, clearly differs from the comparatively eschatological philosophical Marxism and cynical, thuggish Stalinism contributing to Lyotard’s French Marxist context,<sup>188</sup> and it will serve for many years to guide his political practice.<sup>189</sup> Above all, in conceiving of the human as something both creative of meaning, and yet structurally incapable of completing or mastering a field of meaning, Lyotard’s early “humanism” resists the nihilating-transcendent Stalinist project of a perfected “New Communist Man”. In addition to being the locus of meaning, the human is for Lyotard also that which is not only incomplete, but which *inherently resists completion*. Later, especially with regard to Lyotard’s philosophy of infancy, we will see that this early theoretical construction of the human is none too far in the essentials from his mature antihumanism. If, for the early Lyotard, there is to be a universal emancipation of “the human”, this does not mean that history will unfold in a programmatic way so as to perfect humanity. It means, rather, that freedom is both a regulative Idea<sup>190</sup> and the means of achieving it (in other words, freedom for the early Lyotard is immanent to the human, which is how and why all humans should become free).

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<sup>185</sup> “To sublate” (*Aufhebung*) means, in the language of Hegel, “to surpass while conserving”. Thus for the early Lyotard, Marxism surpasses phenomenology while conserving its core truth as a part of itself.

<sup>186</sup> Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, p.131 [120].

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132 [121].

<sup>188</sup> For a more nuanced reading of the moral problems of French Stalinism, see Merleau-Ponty, *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1969.

<sup>189</sup> See the topical analyses in Lyotard, *La guerre des Algériens*.

<sup>190</sup> In the language of Kant, as we will explore in Chapter 2, this means an idea that serves as a horizon to guide practice.

This notion of human freedom, however, is already itself problematic in the early Lyotard. Immersion in phenomenology, particularly the manifestly un-Cartesian work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, planted in Lyotard a suspicion of the well-formed, autonomous Cartesian subject, and would prove conducive to his later antihumanist investigations.<sup>191</sup> Recall furthermore that in *Discours, figure*, Lyotard makes something of a transition, from phenomenology to psychoanalysis. Useful in attacking structuralism, phenomenology nonetheless remains inadequate for Lyotard to the extent that it variously privileges rationalized perception as goal, and the body as a locus of meaning. For this reason, as we saw, Lyotard began to conceive of the material at hand in terms not of perceptions, or, keeping in mind the Marxism to which he subordinated phenomenology, class struggle, but rather in terms of the primary process (energy, both creative and destructive) and secondary process (the *dispositifs* built of that energy to capture, regulate, and put further energy to productive work).

What then does this turn to Freud amount to, in terms of humanism and antihumanism? Perhaps it is not immediately obvious – but it does, as noted, mark an eclipse of the human body as a privileged locus of material analysis. From *Discours, figure* onward, Lyotard will develop his libidinal philosophy from the perspective of energetic intensities and their accretion into *dispositifs* for capturing and regulating them, and this approach, at least in its furthest development in *Économie libidinale*, presupposes neither an “organic” (i.e. well-formed, well-regulated) human body or, for that matter, a human body at all. As we saw, Lyotard conceives of “the so-called body”<sup>192</sup> as at bottom a monoface, aleatory band of libidinal energy. Notably, the same conceptual operation is performed on the human body as on “the social body”, which is to say, “the organic body of all organic bodies, a meta-organic body”,<sup>193</sup> what is at stake in either case is at bottom the production of a monistic account of the given.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> More broadly, Gayle L. Ormiston argues in the introduction to the English translation of *Phenomenology* that many of Lyotard’s later concerns and ideas are present in germ in this first text. For instance, Ormiston links Merleau-Ponty’s notion of *chiasm* to Lyotard’s notion of *différend* (p.13).

<sup>192</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.1 [9].

<sup>193</sup> Lyotard, “A Short Libidinal Economy of a Narrative Set-up: the Renault Corporation Relates the Death of Pierre Overney” in Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader and Guide*, p.206 [*Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1994, p.158].

<sup>194</sup> One notes a certain affinity between the “libidinal” Lyotard and Spinoza. For both, there is one substance, and it is self-differentiating.

Let us examine why precisely this monism of forces is antihumanist. The libidinal-economic approach that I have described runs through Lyotard's more "topical" essays in *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*. Recall here that Lyotard therein rejects politics as a field of representation; essentially, what he espouses is an a-politics of the event. But if politics cannot privilege "the human" as the subject of representation without repeating the nihilating gesture of transcendence, then how else could it privilege the human as the subject of politics or history? An important shift has been accomplished from *La phénoménologie* to *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*; rather than conceive of the human as a perpetually unfinished locus and source of historical meaning, Lyotard conceives of the human as a perpetually unfinished locus and source of energy, *which is itself both meaning and non-meaning at the same time*.<sup>195</sup> That is to say, beneath history there are intensities, which is to say events; ultimately, history, which is to say historical meaning, is a fragile, partial and suspect reconstruction of events/intensities.

To be more precise, the particular human body is not ruled out from consideration insofar as it is a "locus" of energy flow and energy capture/regulation; rather, it is to say that an individual human body is one such locus in a much wider "universe" wherein energy flow and energy capture/regulation are also "located"<sup>196</sup> in the by turns anarchic and conservative growth of the social field, i.e. specifically late capitalism and the institutions which, however paradoxically, try to make it work for them.

This privileging of the broad view may seem arbitrary. Lyotard himself will later muse that his libidinal philosophy becomes something akin to an apology of or at least a constructive criticism for capitalism, insofar as it takes its growth as paradigmatic of untrammelled primary process or energy flow.<sup>197</sup> This must be qualified; it is not capitalism as one finds it, say in the Fourth Republic of Lyotard's day, that Lyotard seems to champion in the mature libidinal philosophy. It is rather capitalism as a revolutionizing force that he seems to take as his model for political activism; that is, the

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<sup>195</sup> Recall that if secondary process means and intends, primary process, dissimulated within it, merely "works" without meaning or intention.

<sup>196</sup> The terms are in scare-quotes because Lyotard is quick to suspect and otherwise problematize spatial metaphors. In the opening section of *Économie libidinale* he collapses the distinction between inside and outside, and depicts the libidinal band as a moebius strip – a monoface surface with no back. The idea is that such spatial distinctions already imply a meaningful carving up of space, which is an operation of nihilating transcendence.

<sup>197</sup> Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, p.90 [188].

investment of ever new regions by primary process, the conduction and acceleration of intensities *without*, as far as possible, the seemingly inevitable capture and rollback of those energies into / as productive *dispositifs*.<sup>198</sup> The bourgeoisie has traditionally wanted it both ways: it wants capitalism to work in its favour as a force of dissolution of traditional manufacture and consumption patterns, etc, but for the structures resulting from and tending to capitalism's own expansion in the bourgeoisie's favour to be themselves indissoluble. Lyotard, apparently siding with capitalism in *Économie libidinale*, is siding not with the conservative family values and the Taylorization of labour, etc, that capitalism has usually entailed and required.<sup>199</sup> Rather, he is invoking capitalism as a force of, to use a loaded and well-worn term, "permanent revolution".<sup>200</sup>

*Économie libidinale* then is antihumanist in the precise sense that its "subject" is primary process, and its "object" is the topography and energy dynamics of the libidinal band – and that this lends itself to the celebration of capitalism, a force that is itself an exemplar of the "inhuman", as it seems in its operations to outstrip and distort the human agency that set it in motion. Significantly, Lyotard's polemic with Jean Baudrillard in chapter 3.2 of *Économie libidinale* is provocatively entitled "Il n'y a pas de région subversive" ("There is no Subversive Region"). Lyotard means that there is no region from which to articulate a critique, a region that is somehow "truer" or more meaningful than the given. And this entails that there can be no such region as the "truly" human, from which to launch a critique of the inhumanity and hence the unnaturalness and injustice of capitalism. That is to say, for the Lyotard of *Économie libidinale* there is no "well-rounded human individual" as one finds him in Fourier, the young Marx, Kropotkin, etc, against which the inhumanity of the present system may be measured, and in whose image a political utopia and positive project may be constructed.

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<sup>198</sup> Recall what Marx and Engel's say of capitalism in *The Communist Manifesto* about bourgeois, i.e. capitalist rule: "Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned ..." (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, Amherst, New York, Prometheus Books, 1988, p.212)

<sup>199</sup> Gramsci, *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935*, New York University Press, New York, 2000, p.275-296

<sup>200</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.20 [29-30].

In fact, such a notion of the well-rounded, i.e. “organic” individual is at odds with Lyotard’s methodological privileging of primary process. Such an individual, to the extent that it could exist, would be a libidinal band (within the larger social libidinal band) that has been worked on, twisted into accordance with certain *dispositifs* concerning sexuality, labour, intellectual work, etc. Held up as what is most deeply, primordially human, the organic individual would actually be, according to Lyotard, the work of something more fundamental – namely, primary process insofar as the latter slows and congeals into secondary process.<sup>201</sup> Moreover, such an individual, to the extent that it is only a posit, a “subversive region” or “critical principle”, a utopic aim to be achieved, is actually no more than a “Great Zero” or a “Concentratory Zero”<sup>202</sup> on the libidinal band – which is to say a *dispositif*, a nihilistically religious organizing principle that serves to capture, cool and regulate revolutionary energies. In short: a transcendent principle which nihilates singularity.

This principle is precisely that of humanism. “Man” is the ideal ghost that Stirner, before Lyotard, sought to exorcise from revolutionary political discourse on the grounds that it becomes a new God, necessitating a new church, a new clergy, and all else that these entail.<sup>203</sup> Despite the fact that humanism has indeed served as a revolutionary watchword or program for hundreds of years, it is rejected by the Lyotard of *Économie libidinale* because, in a manner of speaking, it is not revolutionary enough<sup>204</sup> – in fact it is for Lyotard, at bottom, deeply reactionary. Presenting itself in the guise of a universal program of freeing the human individual and allowing and encouraging her to flourish, humanism is for Lyotard, like Stirner, just one more church to be exposed for what it is and then combated. A church, be it a dissenting “revolutionary” one, demands followers, obedience, and martyrs. In attacking humanism, especially in the Marxist variants of his day, Lyotard is attacking in his view an important expression of nihilistic religiosity.

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<sup>201</sup> It should also be bourn in mind that same holds of the empirical individual, who falls far short of the ideal “organic” individual.

<sup>202</sup> See Hamilton Grant’s more detailed explanation of “Great Zero” and “Concentratory Zero” on p.xiii and xv of *Libidinal Economy*.

<sup>203</sup> See Stirner, *The Ego and its Own*, Mineola, New York, Dover Publications, Inc., 2005.

<sup>204</sup> Keeping in mind that true “revolution” for Lyotard would be an attack on the representational coordinates of politics in which the notion of revolution would even make sense. Therefore the term is somewhat awkward here.

### 1.3 – The Ethical Aporia of Lyotard’s Early Antihumanism

For reasons of scope and relevance, I will restrict this section to the antihumanism of *Économie libidinale*. I believe this is warranted because it was the latter that led Lyotard to drastically shift gears and to seek a new, ethically attuned theoretical vocabulary. Having understood the philosophical choices generating Lyotard’s libidinal antihumanism, I will now explore how that antihumanism, once generated, fares when considered in light of the problem of ethics.

The problematic aspect of Lyotard’s libidinal philosophy has in fact already been outlined: adherence to his methodological materialism, the philosophy of the event, leads to a position purporting to reject criticism (on the grounds that the latter is an instance of nihilistic religiosity). His rejection of criticism is consistent with his methodology; without transcendent principles one cannot give ultimate grounds for the claim to pass true or objective judgement on the state of a given material at hand.<sup>205</sup> But this means that Lyotard’s ability to make convincing moral claims is undermined, perhaps fatally. That is to say, to the extent that moral claims are taken to rest on or be constituted by true, universally valid claims about the world, Lyotard cannot make them without contradicting his methodology. If he wishes to retain his methodology, he has recourse to portraying his moral claims as arbitrary products of his will; but this ultimately fails to constitute a convincing reason to believe them.

Lyotard *could* claim, for instance, that Palestinians should be shown full recognition and respect by the state of Israel.<sup>206</sup> This claim would be prescriptive, but it would also have the pragmatic valence of a truth claim; that is to say, in uttering such a statement, Lyotard would be “performing” it as though it were true-that-it-is-good or true-that-it-must-be that Palestinians be thus respected. But a problem in the form of a dilemma arises for Lyotard regarding the advancement of any such claim. Insofar as he also performs the meta-methodological statements of *Économie libidinale* as if they were themselves true, then one of two possibilities follows: either such claims as that regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could only be wilful and rhetorical, reflective of Lyotard’s

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<sup>205</sup> To reiterate, it is quite possible that Lyotard will say true things; the point is that his philosophy undercuts the claim to know that they are true, or to be able to ground them as such.

<sup>206</sup> Lyotard consistently sides with minorities. See for instance *La guerre des Algériens*, *Heidegger et “les juifs”*, as well as the fifth chapter of *Rudiments païens*. I will use the Israel/Palestine example here on the understanding that it is topical, and stands in for any such moral claim that Lyotard could make.

own tastes or predilections in politics, because there is no universal basis by which to advance them; or, since the truth of his meta-methodological claims is itself not subject to being grounded once and for all, then such moral claims as those pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could perhaps be true, but only in spite of, or even at the expense of, the coherence of his methodological commitment.

Such claims would after all, according to him, rest on and have pragmatic valence within or, what is the same thing, relative to *dispositifs* that he claims are secondary to the singularity of libidinal flows / intensities. Even if he were to provide a detailed rational argument as to why Palestinians should be respected, we would have to assume that, following the methodological materialism of his libidinal phase, he could at bottom advance the purported truth of his conclusions only on the understanding that his position does not obviously or necessarily have right on its side, despite the fact that he is trying to seduce his interlocutors into agreement with him.

I have already noted that Lyotard's philosophy in the libidinal phase is more accurately a rhetorical exercise in the service of "a-politics". Another characterization, which Lyotard seems to retrospectively accept, is that his thought of this period is "a philosophy of the will" in the style of Nietzsche and Spinoza.<sup>207</sup> The precise problem here regarding ethics is nicely posed by Jean-Loup Thébaud. As he rightly points out, "Any philosophy of the will [such as Lyotard's] ... inevitably gets into matters of velocity (slowdowns, acceleration, sedimentation), since, ultimately, it is a monistic philosophy [recall that Lyotard's libidinal philosophy is, in fact, monistic] ... And since it is monistic, differences can be found only by means of ratios and velocities, with the idea that, by putting the syntheses into play, one will modify or one will transform the whole."<sup>208</sup> Lyotard concurs, and further admits that a political thinker cannot do without a horizon of justice.<sup>209</sup> It is precisely such a horizon that is lacking in *Économie libidinale*; one modifies or transforms the whole with a view to what one wills, not with a view to what is just, or to what is right and wrong. Hence the suspicion that for the Lyotard of

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<sup>207</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.89-90 [185-186].

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p.90 [187]. Lyotard replies that Freud's notion of the death drive was employed in *Économie libidinale* to play such a role.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p.90-91 [188].

*Économie libidinale*, such claims as those pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rest on “a view to what one wills” rather than an understanding or account of right and wrong.

This admission about the ethical inadequacy of the libidinal philosophy occurs, of course, a few years after *Économie libidinale*. In the text itself, Lyotard complicates the picture I am attempting to draw because he attempts to dissociate himself from a Spinozan or Nietzschean ethics that would give priority to certain intensities over others on quantitative grounds.<sup>210</sup> On the basis of such an ethics, he *might* claim that thriving, rapid energies are superior to ossified ones, however tenuous the argument could be for such a claim. On the basis of this claim, he *might* further argue that certain blockages, i.e. ossified energies that slow down and thwart such energy, are bad (think here of the walls, fences and checkpoints restricting the movements of Palestinians). But rather than affirm that certain intensities are good and others bad, Lyotard simply affirms that there is “intensity or its decompression ... both dissimulated together”; therefore, “no morality at all, rather a theatrics; no politics, rather a conspiracy.”<sup>211</sup> Lyotard does not even wish to claim that free-flowing primary process is superior to rigid *dispositifs*. He simply affirms, rather, that he and a hypothetical group of conspirators will seek to conduct intensities and rattle such *dispositifs*. His libidinal philosophy is therefore truly a philosophy of the will, since as the later Lyotard will concur, it is a matter of modifying and transforming the whole as one likes, rather than in accordance with what is moral or just.

Despite his attempt to dissociate himself from a vitalist Spinozan/Nietzschean ethics, Lyotard nonetheless gives *implied* ethical priority to free-flowing primary process. He cannot avoid doing so, or else his text would be without its particular persuasive force (and it is, recall, an exercise in persuasion). When pressed on it, however, Lyotard will disavow any *actual* ethical priority. The rhetoric of *Économie libidinale* is designed in part to make the reader forget such disavowals, to seduce him or her into joining the conspiracy in favour of free-flowing primary process.<sup>212</sup> But the careful reader will actually be struck by the highly problematic nature of certain of Lyotard’s claims. To take a particularly pertinent example, his account of political (or rather, a-political) violence produces claims which, failing spectacularly to seduce, should actually be *prima*

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<sup>210</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.42 [54-55].

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> This is one sense of Lyotard’s injunction to “be inside and forget it” (*Ibid.*, p.3 [11]).

*facie* repugnant to readers in the liberal democratic and revolutionary traditions. I will quote him at length:

Power [*pouvoir*] is an ego's, it belongs to an instance, force [*puissance*] belongs to no-one. That force works towards the eradication of all subjectivity is precisely its violence. This is its condition. With the result that, when we say 'Let each go his own way' [*laissez tous passer tout*], it is not a prayer for non-violence, it is violence itself. Stop confusing violence and the white terror. White terror is instantiated, it destroys here to construct somewhere else, over there, it crushes several pieces of [the libidinal band], but it does so in order to construct a centre. Violence is not constructive, it consists entirely in non-construction, non-edification (uselessness), in sweeping away defences, in opening up routes, meanings, minds. This sweeping-away leaves fresh scars, just like a bulldozer. Violence or red cruelty destroy instantiated appropriations, powers. Is it ever pure?<sup>213</sup>

Lyotard distinguishes here between power – “white terror”, an allusion to the counter-revolutionary forces of “order” in the post-revolutionary Russian Civil War – and force – “red cruelty”, clearly earmarked thereby as “revolutionary”, but in a specifically Lyotardian rather than communist sense. Note that only the second term of the alternative truly counts as violence for Lyotard. But “violence” is not a pejorative here. The alternative, boiled down, is between a “terrorist” (implicitly, bad)<sup>214</sup> forced domestication of energies, and a “violent” (implicitly, good, or better) libidinal flow of energies that Lyotard endorses. It is the distinction between secondary and primary process which we have already seen, but described politically, as power and force. And as for those who he charges with confusing the two: are they failing to grasp a real distinction, or one of his rhetorical constructs? And if it is in fact a real distinction, what harm is there in failing to draw it, since according to the monism of *Économie libidinale*, white terror and red cruelty must inevitably dissimulate themselves in each other? Without even an avowed Spinozan/Nietzschean ethics to guide him, it is not obvious how Lyotard can answer these questions.

Significantly, Lyotard goes on to flag the “red violence” of *Économie libidinale* itself,<sup>215</sup> the text is a shot fired in a war on stability and totality. Rhetorically or not, consistently or not, Lyotard fights for the ideal of an uninterrupted primary process. And

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<sup>213</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.261 [310].

<sup>214</sup> Again, recall that throughout *Économie libidinale*, Lyotard claims not to be making value judgments. It is clear however that the distinction between “white terror” and “violence” is drawn in order to explicate and thereby “sell” the second term to the reader.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

he does this doubting, in many cases disputing, whether the latter is “ever pure”. Following this doubt, he notes that for “radical-socialists of the concept” (i.e. Leftist competitors under the sign of Hegel’s nihilating transcendence, e.g. Lefort, Marcuse, etc), such a position raises “the scarecrow of fascism”.<sup>216</sup> But it is crucial to note that for Lyotard, not just any kind of upheaval or disorder counts as “violence”. National Socialism for instance would count as “white terror” rather than “violence” because, to return to the above, it “is instantiated, it destroys here to construct somewhere else, over there, it crushes several pieces of [the libidinal band], but it does so in order to construct a centre.”<sup>217</sup> Its destructive moment, in short, is expended in the name of a permanent (in the case of Nazism, racial and territorial) order. Ironically, Bolshevism would also constitute a “white terror”, for the same reasons. But this is only consistent with Lyotard’s critical stance with regard to the Stalinist, Trotskyite, and other more or less authoritarian revolutionary groups of his time.

It should be noted however that the good “violence” Lyotard describes is still “cruelty”, even if it is “red”. It “leaves scars”; it disrupts at the same time as it opens up. At bottom, the subjects or heroes of Lyotard’s “violence” are not human beings, but rather anonymous forces.<sup>218</sup> Recalling his distaste for ideal forms, one might still indulge in imagining what an ideal “violence” of such a type might look like. Perhaps a natural disaster and its attendant humanitarian catastrophe: a hurricane is a force that expends itself in radically distorting existing structures and channels, while opening up myriad new channels into which further forces may flow – which is not to say that it consciously builds anything new, or anything meant to be permanent. It destabilizes the human and animal population, causing chaotic mass migrations. It sets energies in motion around the globe, including the circulation of money, telecommunications, and so on. But it also leaves victims everywhere. These victims are not consoled by the possibilities inherent in the fact that a school-house or a hospital has become a rubble maze or a new road.

The analogy perhaps needn’t trouble us too much; we should not forget that Lyotard is engaged in a rhetorical exercise, and that his basic picture is a respect of singularity which would, presumably, entail respect for each and every human

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<sup>216</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.31[43].

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p.261 [310].

singularity, and not some ideal singular force. It is worth noting, however, that if this is true, then Lyotard's libidinal philosophy is nonetheless paradoxical. One does well here to point to its palpable Nietzschean inspiration.<sup>219</sup> Nietzsche and Lyotard share a certain perspectivism with respect to truth; truth is contingent, singular, relative. Nietzsche's project, however, was at bottom aristocratic; Lyotard's comparable project is ultra-Leftist in the peculiar style of the French 60s and 70s. Since a perspectival philosophy of the will purports, at least, to lack an intersubjective, transcendent framework of valuation, it is no wonder that starting from the same basic premises, the two thinkers end by drawing strikingly different practical conclusions. Nietzsche, however, appears to be the more consistent of the two when he admits that radical perspectivism produces a never-ending process of struggle for domination rather than a "harmonious plurality of standpoints".<sup>220</sup> As Dews puts it, Lyotard fails to see that "although the universality of a principle does not in itself guarantee absence of coercion, the rejection of universality is even less effective in this respect, since there is nothing to prevent the perspective of one minority from including its right to dominate others: the Empire which Lyotard so vehemently denounces is simply the minority which has fought its way to the top."<sup>221</sup>

Lyotard's continuity, here, with his previous ultra-Leftism seems to be based on nothing other than personal predilections; given its "Nietzscheanization" surrounding the May events, it is otherwise incoherent. Lyotard thus sides with red violence over white terror not because to do so is just, but rather because to do so is to his taste.<sup>222</sup> This would imply, among other things, that National Socialism – which, recall, Lyotard rejects as white terror – is rejected as a matter of taste, and not as a matter of justice. To be blunt: the Lyotard of *Économie libidinale* will rhetorically distance himself from such

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<sup>219</sup> "*Économie Libidinale* illustrates – perhaps more clearly than any other post-structuralist text – the fundamental dynamic of the [French] shift towards Nietzsche during the 1970s." (Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*, p.217.)

<sup>220</sup> "... the distinction of qualities of force or violence upon which the post-structuralists of the 1970s attempt to base their politics cannot be upheld, since one is simply the triumphant version of the other. In this respect, Nietzsche is far more consistent than his emulators, since he accepts, and even celebrates, the fact that, if claims to universality can never be more than the mask of particular forces and interests, then 'life' cannot take the form of a harmonious plurality of standpoints, but is 'essentially' appropriation, injury, overpowering of the strange and weaker, suppression, severity, imposition of one's own forms, incorporation and, at the least and mildest, exploitation." (Ibid., p.218-219; Dews's Nietzsche reference is to *Beyond Good and Evil*, p.175).

<sup>221</sup> Dews, *Logics of Disintegration*, p.218.

<sup>222</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.42 [54-55].

movements as Nazism, but at bottom his libidinal monism entails that *he cannot and will not claim that Nazism is in truth morally problematic*. He is reduced to struggling practically against Nazism and other perspectives he does not like, but he is unwilling and unable to mount a consistent moral condemnation of them.

To be clear: none of this is to suggest that Lyotard (or Nietzsche, for that matter) actually condones or fetishizes the large-scale destruction and chaos of hurricanes, or that he is (or would be) actually indifferent to the moral status of National Socialism. The point is that his rhetoric in *Économie libidinale* seems to render impossible both the claim that individual human beings are actually more important or require any greater ethical consideration than anonymous, “inhuman” flows of energy, and the claim that a plurality of viewpoints is preferable to the dominion of one such viewpoint. In sum: whereas humanism, as a form of nihilistic religiosity, risks nihilating the individual human being in the name of protecting her or promoting her interests, libidinal economics is proudly indifferent to the individual human being, and *for no good reason*; moreover, it is unable to articulate a rational defence of human *plurality*, rather than the struggle for domination of one such human singularity. It is fair to question whether, from an ethical perspective, this is in fact an improvement.

Given such doubt, it pays to recall that *Économie libidinale* is at bottom both a call to join a conspiracy, as well as a tactical device employed in such a conspiracy. This is not to say that Lyotard calls for a new, “more just” underground political party or faction – one thinks of the Bolsheviks in their years of illegality, or Bakunin’s “invisible dictatorship” – but rather, for a group of conspirators within capitalism, conducting and “setting dissimulation to work on behalf of”<sup>223</sup> intensities. But a group of conspirators, even if the conspiracy is in the name of intensities, i.e. events or singularities, presupposes a majority (to be consistent, a majority of singularities!) that takes no active part in the conspiracy. Given that the libidinal conspiracy aims at a kind of permanent social revolution, a transformation of everyday life, this would make the gesture of *Économie libidinale* appear to constitute a sort of vanguardism.

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<sup>223</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.262 [311]. It is interesting that Hamilton Grant translates “faire jouer” as “put to work” rather than “put into play”.

Lyotard's is not the vanguardism of a Robespierre or a Lenin,<sup>224</sup> whose claim to lead the masses would fall under the dictates of a transcendent principle ("freedom", "socialism", "justice", on Lyotard's reading, so many words for the same thing: a guarantying transcendence). The libidinal conspiracy views such principles as no more than particular *dispositifs*, tensors in fact, on the libidinal band, which are highly ambiguous. Rather than foment a conspiracy in their name, Lyotard appears to reject even the claim to be able to speak for anyone, on any grounds, transcendent or otherwise. *Économie libidinale* and its pseudo-normative propositions being, if he is forced to be consistent, a mere expression of his will, Lyotard's conspiracy emphatically does not and seemingly cannot constitute a popular program. But though he appears to reject the Jacobin/Leninist paradox of forcing others to be free, Lyotard still imposes his will on others by seeking to cause certain effects without questioning if others desire them.

Whereas Robespierre and Lenin nominally imposed their will upon others because they felt that it was just to do so, Lyotard imposes his will on others simply because it is his will (or because, rather, primary process "has willed"). If it is fair, as we are so often wont to do, to put the burden of proof on the political radical, then we might ask in whose interest Lyotard foments such a conspiracy; who and how many people he consulted; and whether or not the effects he seeks are or will likely be for the best. To abandon authorial responsibility, as he often does at this point in his career, is not a fair response: compare the relinquishment of ultimate authority on the grounds that primary process has caused one's text on the one hand, and the Jacobin/Leninist claim that one is only acting as history intends, or as one's conscience dictates given the urgent demands of freedom or justice, on the other. Both claims are essentially the same, and both skirt responsibility; the difference is that the Jacobin/Leninist program is nominally humanist. Libidinal conspiracy, then, appears to be merely a vanguardism with no popular base or plan, as troubling as Jacobinism/Leninism in its formal elitism, but without even the pretension of a popular good in mind.

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<sup>224</sup> I take issue here with Žižek's reading of Saint Just's quip that "la révolution ne s'autorise que de soi-même" (Žižek, "Robespierre, or, the 'Divine Violence' of Terror", in Robespierre and Žižek, *Žižek presents Robespierre: Virtue and Terror*, London and New York, Verso, 2007, p.xxvi.) To claim that there is no transcendent "guarantor" of the revolution, like God or a democratic majority, is not to say that the revolution has no transcendent ground in the eyes of its architects (or, as it were, its hijackers). Cynicism and power-hunger aside, the revolution is carried out in the hopes of making immanent some transcendent principle or other, which, historically, usually boils down to universal human freedom.

All of these points, taken together, amount to the following grim assessment: if *Économie libidinale* is not logically or at least pragmatically incoherent, then it is incapable of grounding moral claims in anything other than Lyotard's own desires (or, to the extent that he does not claim authorial responsibility, anything other than a particular tensor, or an accretion of primary process, a *dispositif* that is signed "Lyotard"). Lyotard (i.e. "Lyotard") is adamant that his ("his") desires do not have right on their side; but he still attempts to seduce his readers into participation in a conspiracy to conduct and accelerate primary process and its intensities in the context of capitalism. If one is somehow seduced by this self-avowedly arbitrary tactic, then arguably one still has to grapple with the problem of the nature and moral contents of that conspiracy. On one hand, it would appear impossible for the libidinal conspirator to make moral claims, including those against e.g. Nazism, that could be anything more than rhetorical; on the other hand, the libidinal conspirator replicates a vanguardist logic, but without a popular base, program or animating good. In short: Lyotard's libidinal philosophy, to the extent that sense can be made of it, is ethically impoverished, and in some respects not unlike that which he fought against as a militant activist prior to its publication.

To summarize this chapter, we have seen how Lyotard's basic orientation towards a methodological materialism, or otherwise put, a philosophy of the event, shaped the contents of his philosophy and was reflected in his political commitments. We saw further how such a philosophy of the event necessitated a rejection of humanism, and how Lyotard eventually came to formulate an open and affirmative antihumanism. Finally, we saw how this antihumanism was ethically problematic to a degree that would eventually lead him to seek a new theoretical vocabulary and articulation of his philosophy of the event.

In the next chapter, we will see how Lyotard set out to accomplish such a re-articulation. The period covered will run from 1974 until the mid 1980s; roughly, covering the periods known respectively as "paganism" and "postmodernism", though as I will show, there is considerable overlap between the two. In an effort culminating in *Le différend*, Lyotard will attempt in this period to "remed[y] the shortcomings of *Économie*

*libidinale*; ... to say the same things but without unloading problems so important as justice.<sup>225</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p.xxiv-xxv.

## Chapter 2:

### Lyotard's Linguistic/Ethical Turn: Paganism and Postmodernism

A single ship changed it all.

The whole composition changed. With a rending of the whole pattern of being, a ship was received by the horizon. An abdication was signed. A whole universe was thrown away. A ship came into sight, to throw out the universe that had guarded its absence.

Multiple changes in the color of the sea, moment by moment. Changes in the clouds. And the appearance of a ship. What was happening? What were happenings?

Each instant brought them, more momentous than the explosion of Krakatoa. It was only that no one noticed. We are too accustomed to the absurdity of existence. The loss of a universe is not worth taking seriously.

Happenings are the signals for endless reconstruction, reorganization. Signals from a distant bell. A ship appears and sets the bell to ringing. In an instant the sound makes everything its own. On the sea they are incessant, the bell is forever ringing.

A being.

- Yukio Mishima, *The Decay of the Angel*

Where the essence of the human being is thought so essentially, i.e., solely from the question concerning the truth of being, and yet without elevating the human being to the center of beings, a longing necessarily awakens for a peremptory directive and for rules that say how the human being ... ought to live in a fitting manner.

- Martin Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism'"

Thus far, we have seen how Lyotard's methodological materialism, expressed as a "style" or theme in his early writings and becoming progressively more radical with time, generated an antihumanist philosophy. We have also seen how he employed the terminology and concepts of Freudian metapsychology to give this antihumanism substance and expression. Finally, we have seen how Lyotard's libidinal antihumanism, except where rhetorically successful, lacked a convincing basis upon which to advance or defend any ethical claims whatsoever.

In this chapter I will show how, having run aground on this ethical problem, Lyotard retraced his steps in the mid-to-late 1970s and continued his attack on the nihilistic religiosity of Western metaphysics from a new angle – or at least, with an

enriched theoretical vocabulary in tow.<sup>226</sup> Following Lyotard's development, we will see that enacting such an ethical turn proves exceedingly challenging. If he wishes to stay methodologically consistent, he cannot simply claim that he has discovered a transcendent guarantor of ethical claims; if he does, he will have thereby abandoned the methodological materialism underpinning his enterprise and opened his thought to what are by his own admission totalitarian temptations. He is therefore led to search for a "material" to which the solution to the ethical aporia is immanent. The material in question, as we will see, is thought by Lyotard in his "pagan/postmodern" phase to consist in *language* or more specifically, *language considered in its pragmatic dimensions*. Lyotard's search for a philosophical position that is at once methodologically materialist, antihumanist, and ethically responsible thus takes a linguistic turn. This linguistic turn constitutes the methodological underpinning of Lyotard's ethical turn.

Bearing this in mind, my methodology in the present chapter departs in some respects from that of the preceding. Since Lyotard at this stage of his development is now retracing his steps to some extent, consciously trying to articulate an ethical antihumanism, the specific issue of antihumanism is now more firmly connected to his methodological materialism; since methodological materialism must somehow produce an ethically satisfying antihumanist philosophy, ethical antihumanism is now less of a consequence, and more of a driving concern of Lyotard's intellectual project. Accordingly I will reconstruct what I here call the "philosophical logic" of Lyotard's new, ethically attuned antihumanism. I will show, moreover, how his attempts via the turn to speech-pragmatics ultimately prove unsatisfying on methodological and ethical grounds.

In accordance with this basic picture, the structure of this chapter will be as follows: first, in Section 2.1, I will explore the development of Lyotard's methodological materialism in light of the challenge of formulating an ethical antihumanism. Within 2.1,

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<sup>226</sup> Gérald Sfez (*Jean-François Lyotard, la faculté d'une phrase*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 2000, p.53-56) denies that Lyotard's ethical turn is the result of an error. Lyotard himself suggests (*Just Gaming*, p.89-90 [186]) that *Économie libidinale* was not so much an impasse as a stage he had to go through in order to cleanse himself of Hegelianism and re-approach the topic of ethical and aesthetic judgment from as transcendence-free a standpoint as possible. I do not dispute this interpretation, assuredly knowing less about Lyotard's motivations than Sfez, who was his personal acquaintance; nonetheless, from the perspective of the ethical adequacy of his thought, it is immaterial whether Lyotard *intended* his ethical dead end or not.

a first further subsection, 2.1.a, will explain the overall philosophical logic of the new antihumanism. Lyotard's methodological development yields two roughly-defined phases, "paganism" and "postmodernism" respectively; accordingly, I will break 2.1 further into a second and a third subsection (themselves subject to further sub-division as required). Where pertinent, I will offer critical commentary on this overall logic and methodological development. Then, in section 2.2, I will evaluate Lyotard's success from the ethical perspective, ultimately suggesting that his later writings can be considered in light of what I believe is the unsatisfying nature of his pagan/postmodern investigations (the later writings will in turn be the focus of Chapter 3).

As in the previous chapter, my choice and usage of texts will loosely reflect the chronological development of Lyotard's ideas. But because I am reading him in terms of his attempt to construct a philosophy of the event, and ultimately an antihumanism retaining an ethical dimension, I have therefore made a textual choice that may surprise some readers: relatively speaking, I give minimal attention to Lyotard's most famous text, *La condition postmoderne*.

This might be disconcerting because for many students of philosophy, *La condition postmoderne* serves as a keystone text for understanding "postmodernity" and/or "the postmodern"; in fact, since this book is generally the only one most people have read of Lyotard's, it *de facto* serves as a keystone text for understanding Lyotard himself. It could be argued, however, that it does not actually hold a pre-eminent or even a particularly important place in Lyotard's corpus. It is a tract of largely sociological interest, wherein he argues that advanced capitalist countries have become incredulous of grand narratives (totalizing, universalizing stories), and have thereby also taken to an antihumanism in some respects similar to his own (but also significantly different, and with possibly pernicious consequences). Lyotard also gives pride of place to the narrative language game in that text, whereas language games in general (in his more refined later parlance, phrase regimens and genres of discourse) are what I will focus on herein. This having been said, as I will show there is a philosophical core to *La condition postmoderne* which links it to my overall argument.

More obviously relevant texts for understanding Lyotard's pagan/postmodern phase are *Au juste* and *Le différend*. In the former, Lyotard sketches a plan to investigate

justice in terms of language pragmatics; in the latter, he does exactly that. For this reason, these two texts will receive pride of place in my exegesis, though other relevant texts will also be referenced where pertinent – for example, *Leçons sur l'Analytique du sublime* (which, while strictly speaking a late text, is an excellent source for clarifying the postmodern Lyotard's claims about Kant's analytic of the sublime).

## 2.1 – A New Antihumanism

### a) *The Philosophical Logic of the New Antihumanism*

Due to the ethical aporia I have already described, in the mid 1970s Lyotard faced a stark choice: abandon antihumanism – and therefore, methodological materialism in general – or somehow come to grips with ethics while remaining within their purview. Choosing the former would mean a radical overhaul of his enterprise, an abandonment of his core philosophical presuppositions. Choosing the latter would mean formulating a philosophy at once methodologically materialist, antihumanist, and ethically satisfying. This would entail, however, a methodological-materialist articulation of the material at hand capable of producing not only a staunch antihumanism, but also a compatible and satisfactory ethics. For reasons we have seen already, a monism of libidinal energy had proven to be an ethically unsatisfactory articulation of the material at hand; something else, apparently, was needed.

Following the libidinal phase, Lyotard sought this something else, this new articulation of the material at hand, in language. More specifically, he turned to language in its pragmatic dimension. Granted, to the extent that language pragmatics evokes images of human beings using language to communicate and to create certain other effects,<sup>227</sup> this may seem hard to square with an antihumanist project. Lyotard nonetheless attempts, at this stage, to pull off a thoroughly antihumanist linguistic turn.

Towards a language pragmatics that subordinates the human to an auxiliary role or degraded conceptual position – i.e. in such a way as to resist the easy slide into humanism that pragmatics seems to entail – Lyotard attempts a linguistic “revolution of

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<sup>227</sup> For classic accounts of speech pragmatics, cf. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1975, and Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

relativity and of quantum theory”.<sup>228</sup> Put plainly, he attempts to conceive of language in such a way that human beings are no longer assumed to be in command of it, as “language users”, or at the centre of it, as originators or privileged loci of discourse. Rather, he conceives of language as a kind of primal material, unavoidably preceding and structuring – indeed, in a sense generating, as effect or epiphenomenon – the human (in its linguistic dimension but also, we will see, in a quite general sense). Language pragmatics, far from simply denoting the ways humans do things with words, is reconstrued as the way in which language, always already prior to the human, does things or produces effects which often happen to involve, but ultimately elude the control of and even in a certain respect generate and structure particular human beings.

The reader will likely have noted a phenomenological flavour to my choice of words. This is not accidental; in fact, I suggest that the primary inspiration for the logic of Lyotard’s pagan/postmodern antihumanism is the philosophy of Heidegger,<sup>229</sup> which served as an important touchstone for the 68 generation in France.<sup>230</sup> The reception of Heidegger in France has a history predating the 68 generation, as evidenced by Beaufret, Sartre, Levinas and others.<sup>231</sup> By the time Lyotard “inherits” Heidegger, his influence is already felt in radical currents of philosophy as shown, for example, by the work of Blanchot, Foucault, and Derrida.

Consider Heidegger’s “fundamental ontology”,<sup>232</sup> specifically with respect to the human being, as it is expressed in the “Letter on ‘Humanism’”. For Heidegger, Being,<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.188, p.137 [200].

<sup>229</sup> It was suggested to me at a conference that it is Levinas, not Heidegger, who fits this role. While I do not dispute the importance of Levinas for Lyotard’s thought from paganism onwards (see 2.2 below), it should be noted that Levinas himself was, above all, responding to Heidegger.

<sup>230</sup> Especially that of the *Kehre* or “turn” in Heidegger’s thinking which followed his most widely read work, *Being and Time*.

<sup>231</sup> See Janicaud, *Heidegger en France*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2001, and Renaut, *Sartre le dernier philosophe*, Paris, Grasset, 2000.

<sup>232</sup> Fundamental ontology “strives to reach back into the essential ground from which thought concerning the truth of [B]eing emerges.” (Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism’”, in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, Cambridge, United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.271.)

<sup>233</sup> For clarity’s sake I follow here the convention, adopted by some English-speaking translators/interpreters of Heidegger, of capitalizing the term “Being” when it is a question of the noun designating “what is ... above all”, “the *transcendens* pure and simple”, i.e. Being as such (ibid., p.239, 256). Capuzzi’s English translation of the “Letter on ‘Humanism’”, which I cite, unfortunately renders indiscriminately as “being” four distinct German terms: *sein* [French (infinitif): *être*; English: *to be*]; *das Sein* [French: *l’être*; English: *the “to be”*]; *seiend* [French (participe présent): *étant*; English: *being*]; *das Seiende* [French: *l’étant*; English: *a being*]. For Heidegger, the fundamental ontological difference resides in the difference between *das Seiende* (a particular being, e.g. a lamp) and *das Sein* (the “to be” of a

as such, is basic: it is transcendent to all particular beings, it is “the *transcendens* pure and simple”.<sup>234</sup> The essence of the human being is thus its relation to Being;<sup>235</sup> specifically, “the human being essentially occurs in his essence only where he is claimed by [B]eing”.<sup>236</sup> More specifically still, human beings are the particular beings for whom Being, as such, is a truth (or, to the extent that the human has “fallen” and forgotten Being, and this is Heidegger’s concern, a question to be posed).<sup>237</sup> This is to say that human beings stand in (more accurately, they are) a place or region<sup>238</sup> of Being that is “clear” (i.e. they stand in, or are, the “clearing of Being”).<sup>239</sup> The clearing of being, however, is “clear” not simply for human beings as such (i.e. as particular beings), but in the more basic sense that in the clearing, Being is clear to itself; “the clearing itself is [B]eing”.<sup>240</sup>

It is, in any case, Being as *transcendens* (and not human beings, properly speaking) that “clears” the clearing. Hence human beings have a special place among beings, but only in the sense that Being poses the truth or the question of itself as or through them.<sup>241</sup> Human beings, in Heidegger’s picture, therefore have a special destiny<sup>242</sup> and thus a special dignity<sup>243</sup> not shared by such beings as animals, rocks and trees. Their destiny, and their dignity, specifically, is to be the “shepherd” of Being;<sup>244</sup> more precisely, to be the region of Being that poses the truth or the question of Being and thereby guards against its forgetting and holds the promise that beings might “appear in the light of [B]eing as the beings they are”.<sup>245</sup>

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particular being; e.g. that which is or accounts for the be-ing of the lamp). The clarity of English renderings of Heidegger may suffer where this fundamental difference is not worded correctly; hence, though perhaps inelegant, I have inserted into my citations from Capuzzi a capital “B” in square brackets wherever it is a question of *das Sein*.

<sup>234</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism’”, p.256.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., p.242.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., p.247.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., p.252, 253.

<sup>238</sup> Levinas on Heidegger: “human existence interested him only as the ‘place’ of fundamental ontology” (Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1997, p.38-40.).

<sup>239</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”, p.247.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., p.247, 253.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., p.251.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., p.247, 249.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., p.251.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., p.252.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

Though imbued with a special dignity, it is arguable whether the human is the “hero” of Heidegger’s narrative (if it is pertinent to speak in this way). The human is more like a region of Being that is also a vassal, charged in its essence with the care of Being,<sup>246</sup> of which it is both a revealing and an anamnesis.<sup>247</sup> This does not mean, however, that Heidegger is unconcerned with the human being as such. But the precise nature of his concern should be distinguished from humanism. For Heidegger, humanism is characterized as “meditating and caring, that human beings be human and not inhumane, ‘inhuman’, that is outside their essence. But in what does the humanity of the human being consist? In his essence.”<sup>248</sup> In principle, then, in its concern for human essence, humanism poses questions similar to Heidegger’s. The difference is that relative to Heidegger’s project, humanism sets the bar too low and stops short in its questioning.

Specifically, Heidegger notes the way in which past and existing humanisms stemming from the original Roman thinking of *humanitas*, such as Renaissance, Marxist, Sartrean and Christian humanisms, all assume “an already established interpretation of nature, history, world, and the ground of the world, that is, of beings as a whole”.<sup>249</sup> In other words, “[e]very humanism is either grounded in a metaphysics or is itself made to be the ground of one”.<sup>250</sup> Metaphysics, while it “thinks the being of beings ... does not think [B]eing as such, [i.e.] does not think the difference between [B]eing and beings”.<sup>251</sup> The specific metaphysical interpretation of beings assumed by all humanisms posits the essence of the human to be that of a “rational animal”.<sup>252</sup> While not false, this essential definition of the human being is “conditioned by metaphysics” and thus incomplete or inessential.<sup>253</sup> Heidegger’s own care for the essence of the human being, insofar as it digs to the very bedrock below the categories of “rational” and “animal” themselves, is therefore not a form of humanism. It rests not, in other words, upon a shallow, question-

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<sup>246</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism’”, p.252.

<sup>247</sup> Note here the Heideggerian roots of deep ecology, exemplified by such thinkers as Arne Naess and Dave Foreman: besides being in a unique position to preserve or betray the biosphere, the human being is simply a part of nature, holding no ethical pre-eminence.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., p.244.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p.245.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid., p.246. In other words, metaphysics does not think the ontological difference between *das Sein* and *das Seiende* (Cf. footnote 233).

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., p.245.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., p.246.

begging “interpretation of beings”, but rather arises from a questioning of both metaphysics and the deeper “truth of [B]eing”.<sup>254</sup> Humanism, insofar as it is metaphysical, “impedes the question [of Being] by neither recognizing nor understanding it”,<sup>255</sup> moreover it “does not set the *humanitas* of the human being high enough” and therefore fails to grasp “the proper dignity of the human being”.<sup>256</sup> Heidegger, by contrast, claims to approach the question of human essence and human dignity by way of a proper assessment of metaphysics and an engagement in the fundamental question of Being that metaphysics forgets, covers over, or simply does not pose.

It is crucial to note that for Heidegger, the standing-in-the-clearing-of-Being proper to human beings is language. Not language as a tool or medium of communication; rather, language in its essential relation to Being.<sup>257</sup> Here is how he puts it: “In its essence, language is not the utterance of an organism; nor is it the expression of a living thing. Nor can it ever be thought in an essentially correct way in terms of its symbolic character, perhaps not even in terms of the character of signification. Language is the clearing-concealing advent of [B]eing itself” (“concealing” because language clears, but as a revelation of Being, which implies “the Nothing”, it also partially hides what it clears).<sup>258</sup> As Heidegger puts it elsewhere, “Language is the house of [B]eing”<sup>259</sup> (later, on p.243: “the house of the truth of [B]eing”; later still, p.274: “at once the house of [B]eing and the home of human essence”). This is to say that “[i]n its home human beings dwell. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home. Their guardianship accomplishes the manifestation of [B]eing insofar as they bring this manifestation to language and preserve it in language through their saying.”<sup>260</sup>

Put differently: thinking and saying are the work of Being manifesting itself (to itself, as human being), and guarding against its forgetting (by itself, as human being). The particular way in which human beings are always already preceded by Being is inescapably tied to language, in its essential dimension; as we saw, language is “the home

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<sup>254</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism’”, p.245. Cf. also Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*.

<sup>255</sup> Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism’”, p.245.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, p.251.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, p.242-243.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p.248-249, 272-273.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, p.239.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

of the human being's essence".<sup>261</sup> Hence, like Lyotard, for Heidegger the human being "has" language in only a strictly metaphorical sense.<sup>262</sup> He is not always successful in making this clear, as the above quote concerning the human bringing Being to language suggests. But this does not appear to indicate a blind inconsistency on Heidegger's part. Like Lyotard's, Heidegger's project necessitates writing in such a way that strains the bounds of ordinary language. Since language, according to Heidegger, has been degraded through the history of metaphysics to an operational and communicative tool, "[b]efore he speaks the human being must first let himself be claimed again by [B]eing".<sup>263</sup> This necessitates Heidegger's project of the recovery of thinking from and, in a methodological paradox reminiscent of Lyotard's own, by means of a language degraded by metaphysics.<sup>264</sup>

Heidegger treats this question of language specifically in a later text, "On the Question of Being". There we see more of the properly philological dimension of his philosophical project; Heidegger submits even the term "Being", insofar as we inherit it from a language degraded by metaphysics, to a radical questioning (going so far as to cross out the term whenever he must use it).<sup>265</sup> As Spivak notes in her preface to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, "On the Question of Being" is considered by Derrida, a contemporary and philosophical fellow-traveller of Lyotard, to be the "authority" for his own practice of "writing under erasure" (crossing out certain terms to indicate that they are inadequate, but, given the state of language, necessary).<sup>266</sup> Derrida maintains however that despite what he perceives as Heidegger's attempt to "free language from the fallacy of a fixed origin", he still sets Being up as a transcendental signified, a signified to which all languages ultimately refer, and on top of that accords the human being a special

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<sup>261</sup> Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism'", p.254.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p.247.

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., p.243.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p.254. See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Preface", p.xiv-xv, in Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Much like Lyotard after him, Heidegger is also confronted with the problem of what ethics, if any, is entailed by this thinking of Being and the being of the human being. The difference is that for Heidegger, it is evidently clear that his antihumanism cannot generate an ethics.

<sup>265</sup> E.g. the forward of "On the Question of Being", in Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p.291.

<sup>266</sup> Spivak, "Preface", p.xvi.

relation to that signified.<sup>267</sup> Heidegger's, then, is not a thoroughgoing antihumanism. In Derrida's words,

It remains that the thinking of Being, the thinking of the truth of Being, in the name of which Heidegger de-limits humanism and metaphysics, remains as thinking *of* man. Man and the name of man are not displaced in the question of Being such as it is put to metaphysics. Even less do they disappear. On the contrary, at issue is a kind of reevaluation or revalorization of the essence and dignity of man... [it is] a thinking of Being which has all the characteristics of a *relève* (*Aufhebung*) of humanism.<sup>268</sup>

More could be said here about Derrida's critical appropriation of Heidegger, but for my purposes the important thing to note is as follows: in his linguistic turn, Lyotard adopts something very close to this roughly sketched critical appropriation of Heidegger. While like Heidegger, he searches for something in language which is "always already before" human speech and human beings, he attempts, like Derrida, not to succumb to the temptation to render language nihilating-religious or to retain some special, dignified place for humanity. Lyotard's antihumanism following the libidinal philosophy is therefore in this respect a radicalization of Heidegger's. We will see below that Lyotard's antihumanism, whatever its pedigree, is highly idiosyncratic in its specifics. At this stage, it will do to note its most general outlines, with respect to both the similarities to and the departures from its Heideggerian matrix.

In his pagan/postmodern phase, Lyotard conceives of the pragmatic dimension of language as a question of ontology or, more precisely, Being-as-happening (Being-coming-into-being, occurrence as and at the behest of Being: what Heidegger variously calls *Ereignis*, Being itself as "propriating event" [event which gathers, clears], as pure "there is / it gives").<sup>269</sup> Lyotard interprets language in loosely Heideggerian fashion: it is Being, but Being as happening. Language, i.e. Being, is the *event*: it is Heidegger's *Ereignis*, the "event of propiation". But for Lyotard, this means that "language" is not

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<sup>267</sup> Spivak, "Preface", p.xvi.

<sup>268</sup> Derrida, "The Ends of Man", in Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Brighton, Sussex, The Harvester Press Limited, 1982, p.128, 134.

<sup>269</sup> Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism'", p.240-241 (footnotes), 254. The event is not a special category for Heidegger, but, one could say, Being insofar as it reveals itself ("clears" itself). Time, which the notion of an event seems to presuppose, occurs in any case "essentially in the dimensionality that [B]eing itself is" (*ibid.*, p.254).

simply the natural human language spoken by you and me; rather, it is any and every event, insofar as the event is a kind of phrasing or speaking.

Accordingly, Lyotard's methodological materialism at this stage can be plausibly interpreted as a radicalization of the linguistic dimension of Heidegger's philosophy. But here we can ask whether for Lyotard, like Heidegger, human beings constitute a particular, privileged "region" or "clearing" of Being. To the extent that they are addressees of the fact that Being, as event, "speaks" to them, they are "called" by Being, if not to "think Being" in the specifically Heideggerian sense, then at least to respond to the event. But more fundamentally, as we will see, before it can be said that they are called *by* Being, to respond or otherwise, human beings are called *into* being by Being, which is to say called into being by the event. As with Heidegger, human beings are for Lyotard transcended by Being; Lyotard interprets Being, however, as pure event. Hence, while it appears that Lyotard has abandoned or compromised his struggle against transcendence, he is really saying – not without inconsistency, which is immediately obvious – that singularity is, precisely, what is transcendent (and hence, singularity is still privileged), even to the extent that it is the transcendent condition of transcendence itself.

Where Lyotard departs from Heidegger is with respect to the notion that the human being is the shepherd of Being, the region of Being destined/dignified to pose the truth or question of Being and thereby to open itself to Being's dispensation and guard against its forgetting. In fact, questions of calling or destiny are absent from Lyotard's account of *Ereignis* as bare occurrence; such questions are "situational", i.e. they are of the order of what is presented *by* the event but they are not *of* the event, strictly speaking.<sup>270</sup> In Lyotard's estimation,

[Heidegger] persists in making 'man' the addressee of the giving which in *Ereignis* gives, and gives itself while withholding itself, and [he] particularly persists in making the one who receives this giving into the man who fulfills his destiny as man by hearing the authenticity of time. Destiny, addressee, addressor, and man are instances or relations here in universes presented by phrases [i.e. events], they are situational, *tō logo*. The *There is* takes place, it is an occurrence (*Ereignis*), but it does not present anything to anyone, it does not present itself, and it is not the present, nor is it presence. Insofar as it is phrasable (thinkable), a

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<sup>270</sup> See p.107-108 below on Lyotard's distinction between "presentation" and "situation".

presentation falls short [Bennington's translation: "is missed"]<sup>271</sup> as an occurrence.<sup>272</sup>

As Bennington interprets this passage, "Lyotard distinguishes his thinking about time from the later Heidegger on the *Ereignis* on the grounds that the latter still thinks time in terms of gift and destination, i.e. in terms of instances situated within a *presented* phrase-universe, rather than as the bare 'occurrence' of the event of presentation of that universe".<sup>273</sup> As bare occurrence, Being does not give itself (as question, or clearing, or event) to the human being, without *generating* or having generated the human being. In fact, the formulation of *Ereignis* as "there is / it gives" is already too loaded: it is for Lyotard, simply, a matter of the "there is", the "il arrive". As he puts it, "[p]resentation is not an act of giving (and above all not one coming from some *Es*, or some *It* addressed to some us, to us human beings)".<sup>274</sup> Being is the pure "it happens".<sup>275</sup> This does not entail a stable, pre-existent, transcendent structure, structuring by "donations" or "sendings" the human being as/via language. It entails, rather, Being in terms of the particular phrase or utterance: i.e. "one being, one time", every time.<sup>276</sup>

This being the case, it is only *sometimes* true that a human being is called into being and therefore "by" Being when Being, the event, happens; the presentation entailed by the event is not necessarily a presentation *to* a human being or human beings (or for that matter, a presentation *from* them or *by* them), nor is it necessarily a generation *of* the human being. The seemingly anthropocentric pragmatic poles of addressee and addressor of the event, Lyotard suggests, may be fulfilled by virtually any being.<sup>277</sup> His account of the onto-logic of the event apparently leaves no special role for human beings as such. This is to say that whereas there is a technically antihumanist account of a particularly human destiny for Heidegger, there is none for Lyotard; there is only a thoroughgoing antihumanism.

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<sup>271</sup> Bennington, *Late Lyotard*, self-published, 2005, p.86 (footnote).

<sup>272</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.75 [115].

<sup>273</sup> Bennington, *Late Lyotard*, p.86 (footnote).

<sup>274</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.75 [115].

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, par.113, p.70 [109]. It is interesting to note that in *Le différend* and elsewhere Lyotard favours the strange formulation "il arrive" rather than the more obvious "cela arrive" or "ça arrive".

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*, par.123, p.77 [117].

Lyotard's radicalization of Heidegger is not unproblematic. Since we are presently considering Lyotard's methodology at the most general level, it is pertinent to point out that his linguistic antihumanism is question-begging for reasons already addressed in Chapter 1.1. As I have suggested, Lyotard here appears to begin with methodological materialism and its attendant antihumanism as basic presuppositions, constrained now by the question of whether or not these can be fleshed out in such a way that is compatible with a satisfying ethics. This means, in short, that in his pagan/postmodern phase, Lyotard begins from a methodological position which appears to be at bottom politically motivated – at least if we wish to save it from its apparent arbitrariness. Lyotard will partly admit to this interpretation: even having admitted the need for an ethical turn, he claims that he is not “a philosopher, in the proper sense of the term, but a ‘politician’” whose writings have always been “tactical”; nonetheless, he teases us, “this term [‘politician’] remains to be defined”.<sup>278</sup>

As always, in this new phase Lyotard appears to be aware of the logical problems attendant to his project. As we will see, the particulars of his language-based antihumanism are worked out in two roughly-drawn developmental sub-phases. In the first of these, he still has not effected a complete “revolution of relativity” with respect to language pragmatics (for instance, he still hangs on to the anthropocentric notion of “language games”, inherited from Wittgenstein). In the latter, we see an incredibly rarefied philosophy of language in which he has moved firmly into the territory of a radical Heideggerianism-Derrideanism of the kind described above.

b) *First Developmental Sub-phase: “Paganism”*

Let us return to the moment when Lyotard, having accomplished the philosophically suspect and ethically problematic acting out of *Économie libidinale*, attempted to get his bearings and surmount the ethical aporia. His first attempt to articulate a thorough language-pragmatic methodological materialism yields a loosely dated chapter of his thought, immediately following the libidinal phase and terminating roughly with his engagements with the term “postmodernism” in the late 70s and early

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<sup>278</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.54-55 [121].

80s. Following his own designation and periodization, I will designate this chapter of Lyotard's thought "paganism".

The term "paganism" plays an important, if easily misunderstood role in Lyotard's writings, especially from *Économie libidinale* to *Au juste*. On one hand, it is employed metaphorically, to denote the obverse of what I described in Chapter 1 as the "nihilistic religiosity" that has characterized the better part of the history of Western thought. The reader will recall that in my shorthand, "nihilistic religiosity" denotes an attitude or theoretical position wherein desire is invested in a transcendent principle (put metaphorically, in a "beyond" of some kind), on the grounds that said principle is superior to, subsumes or accounts for – and hence nullifies, in some fundamental way<sup>279</sup> – the immanent singularities arguably constituting the given. The opposite of nihilistic religiosity, then, would be a thought which rather affirms<sup>280</sup> unreservedly those singularities and resists their domestication or subsumption under a transcendent principle.<sup>281</sup>

To extend the metaphor: as the devout Christian worships an absent God who has evacuated a fallen world, she thereby, intentionally or not, devalues that world by conceiving of it as a degraded effect or by-product of her superior, orienting principle;<sup>282</sup> the pagan, on the other hand, lives in a world in which "for the least hiccup, the least scandal, a copulation without issue, a birthing, a pee, a military decision, there [is] a god, a goddess, several gods and goddesses *attending* the act, the patient and the agent" – and not in the spirit of a redundant doubling, but rather so as to affirm by giving shape to the

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<sup>279</sup> Recall the specific ways that I have described the nihilating operation that transcendence performs on events/intensities/singularities: it *makes-them-less-than-they-are*, it *pushes-them-towards-nothingness*. In other words, transcendence would deny the singularity of singularities, the event-ness of events, etc, by subsuming them in a meaningful order or system which, inevitably, fails to do them justice.

<sup>280</sup> "...pagan, that is to say affirmative" (Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p. 15 [6].)

<sup>281</sup> "... all these situations, in the life...called the everyday (as if there were another) on the one hand were valued as intensities, could not decay into 'utilities', and on the other hand did not have to be connected by a paradoxical, dialectical, arbitrary terrorist link to an absent Law or Meaning, but on the contrary, being self-sufficient in their self-assertion, never failed to be affirmed as singularities. The *divine* was simply this self-assertion." (Ibid.) Note Lyotard's debt to Bataille here.

<sup>282</sup> Here I follow the pagan Lyotard's reading of Christianity, which is obviously not the only possible reading. It is worth noting that in his pagan phase, Lyotard's understanding of Christianity is evidently derived from Nietzsche, and that in his later, posthumously published text *La confession d'Augustin* – to be discussed in Chapter 3 – Lyotard deepens and complicates that understanding.

holiness of the given.<sup>283</sup> In short: whereas the Christian (the traditional Western philosopher, the political leader, the activist, etc.) nihilates the world by measuring it against a transcendent principle (God, Spirit, Freedom, Democracy, Communism, etc.), the pagan (Lyotard and certain like-minded philosophers, artists, etc)<sup>284</sup> affirms the singularity, intensity, density, and multiplicity of that world.<sup>285</sup>

It is important to note that the employment of the term “paganism” in this metaphorical way actually precedes the ethical turn which follows *Économie libidinale*. One already finds the term occasionally employed in *Discours, figure*, for instance when Lyotard describes the mitigated paganism of P. Claudel,<sup>286</sup> or the failed paganism of Merleau-Ponty<sup>287</sup> – and in fact, the above-quoted passage is from *Économie libidinale*, wherein Lyotard likens the affirmation of intensities on the libidinal band to a paganism of indefinitely numerous minor gods and goddesses. Given, however, that it here describes libidinal materialism/antihumanism – a thought which we have seen is ethically impoverished – there therefore appears to be nothing intrinsically ethical about the notion of paganism when it is employed in this metaphorical way.

In Lyotard’s writings from the mid to late 70s, however, “paganism” also denotes a revamped philosophical position,<sup>288</sup> coupled by an affirmation of historical examples of thought resistant to nihilistic religiosity. During this period, Lyotard theorizes a philosophical paganism, later to be radicalized and given the more fortune-favoured name of postmodernism.<sup>289</sup> In doing so, he creatively borrows from what he identifies as the philosophical paganism of (a certain) Aristotle, the minor Greek philosophers and sophists, (a certain) Wittgenstein and, most importantly perhaps, (a certain) Kant. Lyotard at no point argues for belief in a multiplicity of gods; rather, in his pagan phase

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<sup>283</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, p. 15 [6]. It is of course a fair question whether this affirmative symbolization constitutes or opens the door to nihilism.

<sup>284</sup> *Discours, figure* enumerates certain “pagan” artists. See also *The Differend*, par.218, p.151 [218].

<sup>285</sup> A later, more radical reading: “Dans le vrai paganisme, il n’y a même pas de pluriel, mais des singularités, des noms propres, et toujours des masques qui ne masquent rien, mais qui signalent des intensités [“In true paganism, there is no plural, but rather singularities, proper names, and always masks that mask nothing, but which signal intensities.”] (Lyotard, *Rudiments païens*, p.96.)

<sup>286</sup> Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, p.10.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid*, p.22.

<sup>288</sup> More accurately: “when I speak of paganism, I am not using a concept. It is a name, neither better nor worse than others, for the denomination of a situation in which one judges without criteria.” (Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.16 [48-49].)

<sup>289</sup> “Postmodern (or pagan) ...” (*Ibid.*, footnote.).

he attempts to think in a fashion which, while affirming singularity and admitting of no transcendent principle, nonetheless attempts to make judgments and strives for justice. In short: Lyotard's paganism is to be a thought that is simultaneously *impious* and *just*.<sup>290</sup> This thought implies an ontology which, in his view, lends itself to the articulation and fomentation of a just impiety.

Whereas in the libidinal philosophy Lyotard avowed that his speaking on behalf of singularities was grounded in nothing but a rhetorical act of the will – at a deeper level, in primary process – here he seeks some other ground, albeit a shifting, tenuous one, for making ethical claims. Accordingly, in the sections which immediately follow, I will explain first how in his pagan phase, Lyotard sought a new conception of the material at hand; second, I will examine how he attempted to reconcile his methodological materialism with the problems of judgement.

#### b.i) *A New Material at Hand*

Lyotard's shift in his conception of the material at hand is signalled in the opening essay of *Rudiments païens*, where he flags his suspension of judgment, his "apathy"<sup>291</sup> regarding the theoretical terminology of *Économie libidinale*. Refusing to comment on whether the libidinal terminology is any more than a "way of speaking"<sup>292</sup> about the material at hand, in *Rudiments païens* and subsequent texts he shifts from *speaking about the material at hand* to *speaking about the ways of speaking* themselves; that is, to the pragmatics of language. Ways of speaking about the material at hand are now treated, in short, as the material at hand.

Arguably, Lyotard makes this move here because, recall, speaking about the material at hand so easily becomes metaphysics (i.e. a nihilistically religious discourse); in fact, even the energy monism of his self-declared anti-metaphysical libidinal

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<sup>290</sup> Lyotard, *Instructions païennes*, Paris, Éditions Galilée, 1977, p.11.

<sup>291</sup> See "Apathie dans la théorie" in Lyotard, *Rudiments païens*.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid, p.130: "...il y a des énergies (façon de parler)" ["...there are energies ({but this is a} way of speaking)"]. Cf. also the later text "A Bizarre Partner" in *Postmodern Fables*, p.140-141 [125]: "...each so-called individual is divisible and plausibly divided into a number of [pragmatic] partners – which is, when all is said and done, what Freud has taught us at least for almost a century and which cannot reasonably be ignored. Let me add that there is no need – quite the contrary – to accept Freud's metaphysics, which he called his metapsychology, to recognize the plurality of addresses, and the plurality of in the nature of those addresses, which make up the tissue of this 'internal' pragmatics".

philosophy was a metaphysics. By turning to language pragmatics, Lyotard signals something important: although discourse on the material at hand, even that which, like his own, fights on behalf of singularity, is perhaps necessarily dubious, one can perhaps get a firmer footing in discoursing about discourse itself. One can doubt, after all, what a particular discourse on the material at hand tells us; one cannot, however, doubt *that* discourse tells us (and for that matter, does much more besides). To the extent that ways of speaking are more radical from a methodological perspective than what they speak about, even if the latter be the material at hand itself, by turning to them Lyotard appears to be more consistent with his methodological materialism than he had been in his libidinal phase.

The problem here is that if the ways of speaking about the material at hand are now to be treated as the material at hand, it is legitimate to ask whether Lyotard's language-pragmatic methodological materialism does not constitute at this point merely another instance of metaphysics. He will grapple with this problem, and we will see in the section on postmodernism below that the impression of a phrase-based ontology certainly arises.

For now, let us note the ethical implications Lyotard draws from his linguistic turn, and how specifically these are expressed during his pagan phase. The new ethical argument begins from his (as we have seen, paradoxical) methodological assumption that the material at hand is too rich or complex to submit to a complete description or theorization. There are, potentially, as many ways of speaking about it as it has aspects; in other words, though the theoretical vocabulary of *Économie libidinale*, for example, is a "way of speaking" about the material at hand, there is an indefinite number of other ways of speaking about it. The pretension of a way of speaking to exhaust what can be said of the material at hand – i.e. to say "the truth" (and the whole truth) about the material – is therefore, according to Lyotard (and this claim is itself paradoxical given his methodological commitments), illegitimate on methodological grounds.

Another way of looking at this is that, to the extent that every determinant judgment about the material at hand constitutes a theory,<sup>293</sup> it must be borne in mind that

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<sup>293</sup> Even an observation sentence like "The woman is carrying a parasol" is underdetermined by the evidence cited to support it, since human senses are notoriously unreliable, and since there is no agreed-

theories about the material at hand are only ever that; they are necessarily under-determined (philosophy of science in the tradition of Hume would concur).<sup>294</sup> A final account of descriptive or theoretical adequacy seems elusive given Lyotard's methodology, to the extent that description and theory are never, by definition, adequate in and of themselves, and they cannot in any case be valued or tested against a meta-rule or transcendent principle.

What *can* be said of the material at hand, then? Jean-Loup Thébaud summarizes: "There is no metalanguage; there are only genres of language, genres of discourse."<sup>295</sup> Lyotard cites certain ancient Greek assumptions about the plurality of singular beings, and emphasizes that language, opinions, rhetoric, are the material in which such beings or singularities or events manifest. For example: "...dialectics [in the Aristotelian sense] allows the judge to judge case by case. But if he can, and indeed he must (he has no choice) judge case by case, it is precisely because each situation is singular, something that Aristotle is very sensitive to. The singularity comes from the fact that we are in matters of opinion and not in matters of truth."<sup>296</sup>

Perhaps, however, there is a logically perfect language transcending all of these heterogeneous formations; such was sought by Frege, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein. To undermine the claims to hegemony of any such language, however, Lyotard draws on the later Wittgenstein's notion of language games.<sup>297</sup> Games in general are like rituals specifying, but also constituted by, various appropriate and inappropriate moves; they are not necessarily competitive, nor do they necessarily imply more than one player.<sup>298</sup> An ordinary language is an evolving patchwork of games. Wittgenstein gives an example of one such primitive game, "a complete primitive language": I yell "slab", you hand me a

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upon number of independent confirmations of the sentence, and under what conditions, which can settle its absolute truth; giving scepticism its due, as far as we are concerned such a sentence can only ever be provisional, even when it is highly plausible. But this is only to say that even a simple observation sentence is only ever a theory about a state of the world.

<sup>294</sup> Even if a theory has never been disproved in spite of numerous tests, has good arguments in its favour, fits well with a complex of other theories, etc, its truth is only ever provisional. This is because science itself must posit the unfalsifiable theory that nature itself will obey or be characterized by the same laws in the future.

<sup>295</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.28 [73].

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27 [70-71].

<sup>297</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford and Malden, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001, par.7, p.5e.

<sup>298</sup> Regarding language games, Wittgenstein suggests we "[t]hink of much of the use of words in games like ring-a-ring-a-roses" (*ibid.*) See also *ibid.*, par.65-66, p.31e-32e.

slab.<sup>299</sup> Ordinary language, however, is also made up of myriad other games of apparently varying complexity: questioning, giving an oration, joking, speaking sweet nothings, etc. Whatever claims to be a meta-language, logically perfect or otherwise, is itself a game and is likely derivative of other games. It arises from and subsists within the general patchwork. As Wittgenstein imagines it, an ordinary language looks like an ancient city; old sections coexist with newer developments, constituting a frayed and perpetually changing assemblage.<sup>300</sup> A logically perfect language could co-exist with but not properly speaking transcend these other discursive forms; at best it would become something like a new subdivision of ordinary language.<sup>301</sup>

The issue here is not just that different games contribute to an evolving, pluralistic patchwork of ordinary language and of language in general (including, e.g., mathematics and music): Lyotard stresses the ultimate *incommensurability* of such games.<sup>302</sup> “It so happens that languages are translatable, otherwise they are not languages; but language games are not translatable, because, if they were, they would not be language games. It is as if one wanted to translate the rules of and strategies of chess into those of checkers.”<sup>303</sup>

If language is indeed a patchwork of games, whose rules cannot be translated into one another, then the claim of any one set of rules, even if logically perfect, to constitute a set of meta-rules, i.e. rules accounting for all the others, is therefore illegitimate: “...there is no outside; there is no place from which one could photograph the whole thing”.<sup>304</sup> Or, to extend the urban metaphor: there is no point in the city from which one could view the whole city at a glance. The heterogeneity of the patchwork evidently always implies a remainder. Even the earlier Wittgenstein’s notion of logical space is meaningless without the assumption of extra-linguistic facts – and as we will see, Lyotard

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid., par.2, p.3e.

<sup>300</sup> Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, par.18, p.8e.

<sup>301</sup> Wittgenstein says of philosophy, which usually reserves for itself this “meta” function: “Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either.” (Ibid., par.124, p.49e.) It is interesting to note that the later Wittgenstein’s conception of a philosophical problem – “I don’t know my way about” (ibid., par.123, p.49e) – is essentially the same as the pagan/postmodern Lyotard’s.

<sup>302</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.94 [194].

<sup>303</sup> Ibid., p.53 [119-120].

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., p.43 [99].

will re-conceptualize such facts as, precisely, linguistic occurrences, which retain an inexhaustible remainder.<sup>305</sup>

But notice that Lyotard again seems to have committed a performative contradiction. His claim is that there is no transcendent position a discursive formation or apparatus may constitute in pronouncing its hegemony or its correctness: there is no meta-language. But is he not speaking in absolute terms when he makes this claim? To hold that there can be no meta-language is to play a language game stipulating something about the total set of possible language games; hence, to claim that there can be no meta-language is to employ a meta-language. It appears as though Lyotard performs here as true a claim that, if it actually *were* true, he could not validly perform.

The following passage from *Just Gaming* may be read as the sketch of a response:

When I say: There is no common measure, it means that we know of nothing in common with these different language games. We merely know that there are several of them, probably not an infinite number, but we really do not know. In any case, the number is not countable for the time being, of if it is, it is so provisionally at best. We also know that these are games that we can enter into but not to play them; they are games that make us into their players, and we know therefore that we are ourselves several beings (by “beings” is meant here proper names that are positioned on the slots of the pragmatics of each of these games) ... The fact that I myself speak of this plurality does not imply that I am presenting myself as the occupant of a unitary vantage point upon the whole set of these games, but simply that these games have the capacity of talking about themselves. And this is what they are presently doing. Some of them, at least.<sup>306</sup>

Lyotard thus tries to evade the charge of performative contradiction by a) appealing to intuition and/or ignorance, and b) dispelling the impression that a subject is speaking / seeing / grasping the whole. As regards the first point, we will see below how he appeals to the related Kantian notions of reflective judgment and regulative Idea. Being unable for logical/pragmatic reasons to maintain that there is no possible meta-language, i.e. that there is rather a radical heterogeneity and dispersion among language games, Lyotard appeals to an Idea of heterogeneity and dispersion that cannot be ultimately proven but which may plausibly, on his view, regulate judgments. As regards the second point, we have already seen in Chapter 1 how Lyotard rhetorically distances himself from authorial responsibility when pressed on matters of consistency. Although

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<sup>305</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.84-85, p.51 [83-84].

<sup>306</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.51 [115].

he is apparently *saying* that there is no possible meta-language, he seems to insist that it is merely *being said*, by language games talking about themselves under the aegis of an Idea, that pronouncing the radical heterogeneity of language is quite plausible.

However we judge these appeals, Lyotard ultimately draws upon the description of the material at hand as radically heterogeneous in order to claim that the pretension of a way of speaking to exhaust what can be said of the material at hand is not only methodologically flawed, but also unethical; terroristic even.<sup>307</sup> Descriptions or theorizations of the material at hand cannot justifiably command anything more than open-minded, disinterested consideration; to claim that a theory is capital-T True, that it is testable in some way against the Real (or that it gets to the heart of the Real in some sense), is to bestow undue powers on a particular, in any case under-determined discursive formation, heterogeneous with respect to a host of other formations also claiming validity. Descriptions or theories about the material at hand ultimately fail to exhaust what can be said, or rather, what is legitimate to say. To the extent that they nonetheless attempt to silence or foreclose others, they have intervened in the material at hand in a way that cannot be ultimately grounded or justified. In this sense – and Lyotard will develop this in his postmodern philosophy – the fact of their pushing out or foreclosing other possibilities is also unjust.

b.ii) *Judgment: From Nietzsche to Kant*

Thus, having re-approached the question of the nature of the material at hand, Lyotard still faces a problem. At a glance, investigation of language pragmatics yields either a relativism about different language games, or a meta-principle which would make sense of and regulate them – precisely, a principle which would transcend and therefore nihilate them in their singularity. For reasons we have already seen, Lyotard is resistant to transcendent accounts, and denies producing them even where this appears to be what he is doing. But in a certain sense he is also resistant to relativism; such was, precisely, the problem of ethics and the normative basis of politics arising from his libidinal philosophy. A Nietzschean philosophy of the will and its attendant

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<sup>307</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.100 [204]: “Isn’t there, in the pretension to regulate other language games, something like terror?”

perspectivism failed to satisfy Lyotard, and for this reason he turned towards a philosophical position perhaps better capable of harmonizing the conflicting claims of singularity and coherence. It is here that we should consider his turn to Kant: if there is to be no transcendent account of language, then that which wills must at least be capable of judging in particular cases – that is, willing tenuous connections or “passages” between incommensurable language games – and capable of eluding the charges of arbitrariness and performative contradiction. Here Lyotard draws upon the Kantian concepts of reflective (as opposed to determinant) judgment, and regulative Idea.

As regards the distinction between determinant and reflective judgment, here is how Kant defines them:

Judgment in general is the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the Universal. If the universal (the rule, the principle, the law) be given, the Judgment which subsumes the particular under it ... is *determinant*. But if only the particular be given for which the universal has to be found, the judgment is merely *reflective*.<sup>308</sup>

Lyotard’s notion of properly philosophical, artistic and psychoanalytical practice is therefore of the order of reflective judgment: recall that in starting out, one seeks for the rules that will have been used in proceeding. Reflective judgment, note further, is consistent with his methodological materialism; determinant judgment, on the other hand, is nihilating-religious.

Echoing the roughly Nietzschean position he is apparently in the process of evacuating,<sup>309</sup> Lyotard emphasizes that reflective judgment has a creative dimension; it is not simply a passive faculty, but rather takes an active part in the search for criteria. For the Kant of the Third Critique, Lyotard notes, “[t]he ability to judge does not hang upon the observance of criteria”.<sup>310</sup> Rather, the ability to judge takes the form “...of the imagination. An imagination that is constitutive. It is not only an ability to judge; it is a power to invent criteria”.<sup>311</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, New York, Prometheus Books, 2000, p.16-17.

<sup>309</sup> “For Lyotard, the question is put this way: if ‘one is without criteria, yet one must decide,’ from where does one derive the ability to judge? He proceeds to offer a Nietzschean answer to this Kantian question, as this ability ‘bears a name in a certain philosophical tradition, namely Nietzsche’s: the will to power’.” (Schrift, *Nietzsche’s French Legacy*, p.105.)

<sup>310</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.17 [52].

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

Even when he enjoins us to be pagan, Lyotard has “no criteria” of judgment laid out in advance; “neither essence nor necessity to uphold this prescription. At most, it is regulated by an Idea”.<sup>312</sup> The Idea in question is a Kantian regulative Idea, “a sort of horizon that performs a sort of regulatory role with respect to action ... simply a pushing to the limit, the maximization of a concept”.<sup>313</sup> An Idea posits that which cannot be brought under a determinant judgment as in any case possible, conceivable. Think for instance of the Idea of human progress, discussed by Kant in his political writings: we can conceive of human progress even though we cannot grasp it or present it under the guise of a determinant judgment.<sup>314</sup> Another such idea is the pagan Lyotard’s aforementioned Idea of maximum linguistic heterogeneity and dispersion.

Justice, which implies prescription, is itself of the order of an Idea (notably, however, Lyotard insists that “in contradistinction to what Kant thought, this Idea is not for us today, an Idea of totality”<sup>315</sup>). Strictly speaking one cannot derive, in determinant fashion, a prescription (“be pagan, i.e. just”) from a description (“there is an indefinite number of heterogeneous language games”) and expect to retain the force of the prescription – for prescription and description are, themselves, heterogeneous language games.<sup>316</sup> As Lyotard puts it, “if one wants criteria in the discourse of justice one is tolerating de facto the encroachment of the discourse of justice by the discourse of truth”.<sup>317</sup> One can, however, “extend, or maximize, as much as possible what one believes to be contained in the description”.<sup>318</sup> In this way, when Lyotard says we *ought*

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<sup>312</sup> Ibid., p.18 [53].

<sup>313</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.46 [107]. See also ibid., p.58 [127]: “one follows the concept beyond what reality can give it as sensible to subsume and one sees what can be thought by extending thus the scope of the concept.”

<sup>314</sup> See “An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?” in Kant, *On History*, Indianapolis and New York, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963. For Lyotard’s commentary, cf. *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2009 as well as Kant notice 4 in *The Differend*.

<sup>315</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.88 [183].

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., p.45 [104]: “Any discourse meant to account for prescriptions, transforms them into conclusions of reasonings, into propositions derived from other propositions, in which the latter are metaphysical propositions on being and history, or on the soul, or on society. In such a derivation, or deduction [sic], [of] prescriptions, what is derived or deduced is not the prescriptive itself but the citation of the prescriptive, that is, the image, the representation, in the linguistic sense, of the prescriptive...” Actually, one cannot derive a prescription at all: “the prescription is always transcendental ... It can never be derived. And therefore the question of the prescription will always remain an open question”. (Ibid., p.98 [201].) The prescription is of the order of the event.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., p.98 [201-202].

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., p.59 [129].

to be pagan, i.e. just, he is appealing to the Ideas of maximum heterogeneity/dispersion and letting-be of singularities. Reflective judgment simply works under these regulative Ideas in the thick of *prima facie* linguistic dispersion, prescribing with no guarantee.

Justice is therefore, on this view, something like using language and judging in such a way that gives beings/singularities/events their due: “Here the Idea of justice will consist in preserving the purity of each [language] game, that is, for example, in insuring that the discourse of truth be considered as a ‘specific’ language game, that narration be played by its ‘specific’ rules.”<sup>319</sup> Lyotard further refines this account of justice: on the one hand, there is “a multiplicity of justices, each one of them defined in relation to the rules specific to each game ... Justice here does not consist merely in the observance of the rules; as in all the games, it consists in working at the limits of what the rules permit, in order to invent new moves, perhaps new rules and therefore new games”.<sup>320</sup> On the other hand, there is “the justice of multiplicity: it is assured, paradoxically enough, by a prescriptive of universal value. It prescribes the observance of a singular justice of each game such as it has been situated: formalism in the rules and imagination in the moves ... it prohibits terror ...”<sup>321</sup> There is a justice proper to each game, but also an encompassing justice which would amount to the observance of these justices and the maximization of experimentation and dispersion between them.

Lyotard rightly signals the paradox of this “justice of multiplicity”. There is a somehow universally binding prescription, backed in some way by an Idea, to respect the singularity of games and foment maximum dispersion in and between them. One must respect/let be the specific justices, i.e. the rules, of particular games; when playing a game one must not only play by its rules but also push/bend/exploit said rules to the point of inventing new games. But the universal prescription itself is without the force of a guarantee: on the one hand, since prescription cannot be derived, “the question of prescription [itself] will always remain open”,<sup>322</sup> on the other, it appeals to an Idea but it

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<sup>319</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.96 [199].

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100 [204-205]. The idea of being faithful to the rules of a game to the point that one invents a new one may sound counterintuitive or even senseless, but consider John Coltrane: he learned the rules of the saxophone so well that he was able to invent new rules, perhaps even altogether new games. Another way of putting this seeming paradox is that the more one submits oneself to discipline, the freer one becomes; think of the relative freedom that comes from disciplining one’s body at the gym.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100 [204-205].

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, p.98 [201].

is not obvious how or why an Idea makes a prescription binding.<sup>323</sup> Moreover, the universal prescription in question issues from one particular game among many. What if there is another game, the rules of which call for maximum *violence* to other games? Paradoxically, the universal prescription in question would have to both agree to respect the purity of this second game, but also judge it to be illegitimate (because terroristic). The call to be pagan is thus caught: apparently it must concede that it is only of relative value, or else lord over the intercourse of other games as well as how the games themselves are conducted, committing a double injustice. As Lyotard asks, “Isn’t there, in the pretension to regulate other language games, something like terror?”<sup>324</sup>

By way of illustration, take the following scenario, which I draw from the John Waters film *Pecker*. Two teenage boys play a game they call “shopping for others”: they surreptitiously place unwanted and in some cases embarrassing items in the shopping carts of strangers. When they get to the checkout, the shoppers are confounded (for example, a vegetarian hippy finds cuts of meat in his cart). There is mass confusion, and the supermarket’s operations break down. Being pagan, i.e. just – irrespective of the fact that it is not obvious from whence the call to be pagan gathers its binding force – would appear to imply contradictory prescriptions here. To respect the specific justices implied by the play of both games (“shopping for others” on the one hand, simple or traditional or orderly shopping on the other), one would somehow have to maintain that orderly shopping and the disruption of orderly shopping both be upheld in their purity. But this is impossible, since orderly shopping makes no room for the rules of the game the boys are playing. In fact, the boys are disrupting orderly shopping and thereby committing an injustice against the orderly shoppers. Logically, according to paganism, this injustice should be respected, since it falls under the purity of the game “shopping for others” (and

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<sup>323</sup> As Bill Readings puts it: “If *Just Gaming* refuses the representable law [i.e. law derived from determinant judgment] as unjust and demands a practice of reflective judgment, without criteria, a judgment which respects only the irrepresentable law of the idea of justice ... it has a problem as to *why* this should be so. What is so important about respecting the heterogeneity of the prescriptive language game, directed as it is to an idea rather than an object of cognition? *Just Gaming* in this sense seems to privilege the prescriptive game exorbitantly.” (*Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, p.113.) Oddly, Lyotard appeals at one point to the *impurity* of language games where it is a question, at the same time, of respecting/preserving their purity: justice intervenes “inasmuch as these games are infiltrated by prescriptions ... To the extent that these language games are accompanied by prescriptions of the type ‘repeat me’ or ‘carry me out’ or ‘implement me,’ then the idea of justice must regulate these obligations” (Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.96-97 [198-199].).

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, p.100 [204].

since games are impure to the extent that they are permeable to prescription, the prescription “repeat”, which the game seems to imply, should also be respected). But the game should also simultaneously be decried, since it is an incursion into the specific justice of orderly shopping.<sup>325</sup> Ultimately, moreover, the claims made to this effect are themselves derivative of a third game (“pagan judging”) that has no *prima facie* claim to make binding prescriptions for both sets of players.

In his pagan turn, it is clear that Lyotard has done much to both *suggest* and to some extent *describe* the dispersion, singularity and untranslatability of language games; it is not clear however that his ethical *prescription* with respect to them carries or could carry much force, appeals to the Idea of justice notwithstanding. Apart from the paradoxical claim that language is too heterogeneous to make meta-linguistic pronouncements, it is difficult to see how the purported facts of the heterogeneity of the material at hand, i.e. language, entail that something unjust has taken place when one such heterogeneous element of the material strives for hegemony over the greater mass of material. Perhaps language is indeed radically heterogeneous material; perhaps it is naïve or wrongheaded for a particular discursive formation to claim logical priority and/or hegemony over another, or to claim that the other should be altogether silenced. But it is hard to see how one can justify the move from this descriptive claim about language to the normative claim that such moves are injustices, especially where the rules of a particular game simply call for dominance over others. Recall Nietzsche’s value-neutral assessment that a hegemon is a minority which has won. With respect to the Waters film, it could be argued that the boys have simply bested the shoppers by forcing them into a game they were not initially aware they would be playing.

#### b.iii) *Supplement: Pagan Antihumanism in Context*

Given a new conception of the material at hand, as well as a burgeoning philosophy of judgment, paganism represented an advance (or at least, a significant change) in Lyotard’s antihumanism. But so far we have been looking at this change in terms of philosophical influences and the internal dynamics of Lyotard’s own thought. I

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<sup>325</sup> What, moreover, of the claim that both games should be worked to the point of inventing new ones? From where in particular derives the force of the prescription that orderly shoppers should push shopping into brave new territory?

believe that greater understanding can be gained from putting it in its wider philosophical/historical context.

Besides a few abiding sympathies, e.g. Lyotard's friendships and philosophical resonances with Deleuze and Derrida, his contributions to French thought remained embattled during the pagan phase. Whereas, however, from his Marxist-phenomenological to his libidinal phase Lyotard fought the sclerotic, cynical, and failing humanisms of "official" Marxism and Gaullism / bureaucratic capitalism, in his pagan/postmodern phase of the 70s and 80s he had to contend with an emerging French neo-humanism. The latter was highly critical of both Marxism as well as of Lyotard and his intellectual allies. The new humanism, drawing largely from the Kantian and Christian traditions, as well as upon anti-revolutionary arguments "appropriated from Popper, Talmon and Arendt",<sup>326</sup> attempted to put human rights on the agenda by resuscitating and philosophically grounding the human subject. In certain respects the new humanism also helped to constitute a humanitarian agenda as regards the duties of the affluent global North to the impoverished global south. Known in the media as the "nouveaux philosophes",<sup>327</sup> a faction of (in many cases) one-time radical philosophers<sup>328</sup> including Maurice Clavel, Bernard-Henry Lévy, André Glucksmann, Phillippe Nemo and others, embodied and to some extent vanguarded this return to humanist themes and arguments in France. Ferry and Renaut, whose critique of Lyotard's intellectual cohort we saw in the introduction, may also be situated in the ballpark of so-called new philosophy.

Since Lyotard's antihumanism is often played down or even discounted by chalking it up to its historical context (a genetic fallacy, to be sure), parity suggests that the historical genesis of the nouveaux philosophes is also worth noting. As Bourg puts it, "[t]his revival of philosophy, and with it, metaphysics, religion, and ethics, was enabled

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<sup>326</sup> Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution*, p.123.

<sup>327</sup> Note that "philosophe", philosopher, has a connotation in the French context that might be missed by English readers; the new humanists were branded as the 1970s/80s counterparts of the great humanist "philosophes" preceding the French Revolution such as Voltaire, Diderot, and D'Alembert. The connotation is clear: these men were to be seen as picking up the torch of Enlightenment, and heralding a revolution of humanist values, in a context of (Marxist, ultra-Leftist, crypto-fascist) tyranny.

<sup>328</sup> Khilnani's backhanded characterization: "former *gauchistes* [far-Leftists] who took history to be little more than the playing out of ideas, and to whom the Marxist conception of revolution inevitably resulted in terror and violence administered by the State" (*Arguing Revolution*, p.123).

by the experience of historical pessimism and the discovery of the phenomenon of [e.g. Soviet] dissidence”.<sup>329</sup>

Bourg even goes so far as to claim that “if a single global theme can be said to have unified the otherwise disparate phenomenon of New Philosophy, it was historical pessimism”.<sup>330</sup> In other words, “[t]he overall gloom of the New Philosophers derived from a disillusionment with the idea that human liberation could be fulfilled in history”.<sup>331</sup> History as “an arena of human action and a meaningful process through which the potential for emancipation could be actualized”<sup>332</sup> was abandoned by these thinkers in the wake of the political disappointment of May ’68. Foucault’s politically ambiguous and rather bleak philosophy of history was also a considerable influence.<sup>333</sup> As Bourg reads them, “The New Philosophers’ fascination with ethics and morals reflected the re-emergence of already existing elements in a Left confronted by the objective frustration of its hopes”.<sup>334</sup>

One important catalyst for this “objective frustration” was, as mentioned by Bourg, the phenomenon of dissidence. A rough account of its effects in France runs as follows.<sup>335</sup> In 1975, Paris was visited by Soviet dissident writer Aleksander Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn had spent eight years in forced labour camps for having criticised Stalin in a letter sent from the front during World War Two. In a context of post-68 malaise and an increasing intellectual disillusionment with the prospects of revolution and the organized Left, Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* was received as a revelation; part memoir, part testimonial collection, part prison camp ethnography, the several volumes of the work brought the harsh realities of the Soviet prison camp system to the world’s attention. Its publication understandably sparked an intellectual effort in France to come to terms with its philosophers’ complicated and often ambiguous relationships<sup>336</sup> to the policies and official philosophy of the Soviet Union (not to mention Mao’s China). Hadn’t Sartre,

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<sup>329</sup> Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics*, p.240.

<sup>330</sup> Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics*, p.241.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., p.240: “...the New Philosophers were ... indebted to [Foucault], even if they clearly took unrigorous liberties with his thought.” Khilnani, *Arguing Revolution*, p.138-139: “...by the late 1970s [Foucault] had become ... a central (if often subliminal) reference for the New Philosophers.”

<sup>334</sup> Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics*, p.245.

<sup>335</sup> See also *ibid.*, p.243-244.

<sup>336</sup> *Grosso modo*, Khilnani’s *Arguing Revolution* is an excellent introduction to this topic.

Merleau-Ponty and Althusser, among others, at times been blind to the worst abuses of the Soviet and/or Chinese systems? Hadn't they defended or at least studiously failed to critique the Soviet and/or Chinese systems on several occasions? Was their blindness perhaps not wilful to some extent?

In broad brushstrokes, the critique levelled at Marxist philosophers and the '68 generation by the nouveaux philosophes centred on their perceived intellectual and practical Soviet/Chinese collaborationism, in some cases their purportedly implicit anti-Semitism,<sup>337</sup> as well as, at least in the case of Althusser and the '68 generation, their arguably pernicious antihumanism. It is important to draw careful distinctions on this count, since French philosophers of the time were by no means uniform in the ways they negotiated their Marxism, their relationships to Judaism, and/or their antihumanism. In Lyotard's case, it is not possible to speak of his support for the Soviet or Chinese systems (his early position having been an extremely refined and in any case highly critical version of council communist, not state socialist, ideology). Likewise, he cannot be said to have been anti-Semitic unless, perhaps, one conflates the Jewish people with the state of Israel, of which he was to some extent critical.<sup>338</sup> With admirable consistency, in any case, the new humanist philosophers painted the "68 generation" and their more orthodox Marxist forebears with a totalitarian<sup>339</sup> or at least proto-totalitarian brush.

What Soviet/Chinese Marxism, Fascism/Nazism and French Marxism and antihumanism had in common, so the new philosophers' argument went, was a base denial of human freedom and dignity (corollaries of antihumanism and its critique of the subject). A denial of human freedom and dignity was, after all, the basic premise of communist and fascist/Nazi totalitarianism. Ultra-Left French antihumanism such as Lyotard's, if it was not simply disingenuous crypto-totalitarianism, therefore wasted its time trying to formulate and construct radical libertarian brands of socialism from

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<sup>337</sup> For Glucksman, for instance, "[i]n the end anti-Semitism was the only value the German master thinkers – Fichte, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche – truly shared with their twentieth-century inheritors" (Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics*, p.293.).

<sup>338</sup> If one compares, for instance, *Le différend*, par.93 with the arguments in *Heidegger et "les juifs"*, the distinct impression is created that insofar as it transforms the differend into a litigation (see Chapter 2.2 below), the state of Israel is, in Lyotard's terms, not authentically "jewish" (see Chapter 3.2 below).

<sup>339</sup> Khilnani characterizes the use of "totalitarianism" in this period as a "terminological bludgeon"; it was the "obsessional centre" of the new philosophers' reflections (*Arguing Revolution*, p.128, 124).

totalitarian premises.<sup>340</sup> The complicated and frequently changing positions of individual philosophers with respect to Marxism and its practical applications were thus often chalked up to a base complicity with totalitarian terror; moreover, public gaffs such as Foucault's initially enthusiastic and largely uncritical support for the Iranian Revolution of 1979 were seized upon as illustrative of both the moral poverty of French antihumanism, as well as the basic confusion that arises when liberation is theorized starting from what the new humanists claimed are totalitarian premises. From this perspective, Lyotard's struggle against totalitarian variants of Marxism as well as capitalism and his promotion of minoritarian/liberation struggles was either tragic or farcical, because he proceeded from the very premises that were argued to nourish totalitarianism.<sup>341</sup>

Lyotard, however, roots totalitarianism in philosophies of transcendence rather than (simply) the denial of human freedom and dignity. Insofar as human freedom and dignity are employed in a transcendent schema of valuation, they actually serve to nihilate human singularity; and this, precisely, is what constitutes the conceptual core of totalitarianism in Lyotard's view. Human freedom and dignity, taken as sacred concepts, can and do work against concrete human freedom and dignity; taken to extremes, they annihilate them.

Consider that Soviet communism,<sup>342</sup> rightly regarded as authoritarian and, at certain stages perhaps, totalitarian, was premised on an ideology of human emancipation. It is not simply that the Soviet state decided to violate human freedom and dignity, and that therefore Solzhenitsyn should witness the horror of the gulags; rather, by elevating human freedom and dignity to the status of animating principles or grand narratives, the Soviet state found itself with a means to justify the incarceration and murder of human individuals committing the slightest offences against its world-historical mission to secure the freedom and dignity of *humanity*, represented in the Soviet instance by the empty universality of working class consciousness (recall that Solzhenitsyn got eight

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<sup>340</sup> Recall the point in Chapter 1 about Lyotard's arguably paradoxical Nietzschean heritage. It is in this spirit that, in addition to their scathing attack on "May 68 Thought", Ferry and Renault edited a collection entitled *Why we are not Nietzscheans* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997).

<sup>341</sup> While Ferry and Renault do not appear to take Lyotard very seriously in their *French Philosophy of the Sixties*, they do, however, cite a writer-as-masturbator joke from *Économie libidinale* as indicative of "just how far the 'philosophists' took the annihilation of subjectivity" (p.17).

<sup>342</sup> A similar argument, but with respect to Nazism, will be explored in Chapter 3.2.

years for criticizing Stalin in a letter to a family member; others got worse for even less, even nothing).<sup>343</sup> In sum, under Soviet communism the freedom and dignity of a human individual was not as important as the freedom and dignity of humanity (conceived locally as the dictatorship of the proletariat in the process of building of socialism); therefore the former could be sacrificed to secure the latter. As to how many individual lives may be sacrificed to attain such an end, the only limit seems to be the maximum capable of ensuring that end's attainment.<sup>344</sup>

From Lyotard's perspective, therefore, the criticisms levelled at him by the new humanist philosophers were off base (in fact, they were "insulting nonsense").<sup>345</sup> He does, however, suggest that the nouveaux philosophes are of interest to the extent that they may be read symptomatically:<sup>346</sup> they represent a sea-change in how French intellectuals stand with respect to the Marxist narrative. Like the new humanists, Lyotard saw the significance of Solzhenitsyn's publication, especially as regards the claims of justice; unlike them, however, he did not see it as levelling a blow at his position. In fact, since in formal terms Solzhenitsyn presented a dispersion of small narratives against the official grand narrative of Soviet Marxism, Lyotard even read the book as illustrating to some extent his new pagan philosophy.<sup>347</sup> Whatever his authorial intentions, Solzhenitsyn, as Lyotard reads him, delivered a blow not simply at totalitarianism, but humanism as well.

Thus, where others joined the renewed discourse on human rights and Enlightenment values, Lyotard continued to fight against the current and cut a more or less idiosyncratic figure in French philosophy. Far, in fact, from giving ground to the new French humanism (or for that matter, the new German humanism of Habermas, Apel, Honneth and others), Lyotard maintained into the mid 1980s an increasingly austere and

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<sup>343</sup> I am not claiming, and nor is Lyotard on my understanding, that the Soviet state always invoked high principles in this manner; as Solzhenitsyn's text aptly shows, the Soviet state apparatus contained its share of cynical careerists. The point rather is that the world historical mission of the Soviet Union was always on hand to serve as the final arbiter in practical disputes and dilemmas.

<sup>344</sup> The heart of "totalitarian" ethics would therefore seem to be utilitarian, and to constitute an eschatology of sorts; the abuses of the state *will have been justified* when the ultimate end is attained. See Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon*, Middlesex, England, Penguin Books Ltd, 1971, and Merleau-Ponty's previously referenced response, *Humanism and Terror*.

<sup>345</sup> Lyotard, *Instructions païennes*, p.12.

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38-40.

rarefied antihumanism. Whereas the essence of the new humanism was a principled retreat from the “excesses” of the 60s and 70s, Lyotard still sought to push the antihumanist agenda as far as possible; bearing in mind, of course, his proviso that it should not discard the question of its ethical basis, of justice. This ethical element, which he shares with his humanist critics, leads him to attack not only humanism, but a different, pernicious form of antihumanism characterizing late-capitalist societies.

c) *Second Developmental Sub-phase: “Postmodernism”*

It is perhaps the defining irony of Lyotard’s intellectual career that, having sketched a radical new philosophical project in the important but relatively overlooked *Au juste*, he would shortly thereafter become famous for what he considered an “occasional”<sup>348</sup> text of largely sociological interest. Far from the major statement of his philosophy, as many have interpreted it, *La condition postmoderne* was “a report on knowledge” commissioned by the Quebec government. Published in 1979, it propelled Lyotard to international fame; he subsequently became something of a postmodern icon during the 1980s (this has unfortunately dated and pigeonholed him; though in my opinion a philosopher asking perennially important questions, he has fallen out of fashion in many academic departments, and this is likely to some extent a function of the postmodern label). Lyotard was surprised and somewhat chagrined by the overwhelming public interest in his text, given its occasional nature, the ease with which he could be thenceforth labelled a “postmodern philosopher” and, no doubt, the fact that he had not gained comparable recognition for his specifically philosophical contributions. Nonetheless, the book is important for having articulated the sociological condition within which we are called upon by Lyotard to be pagan, that is, impious and just.

As we saw earlier, the central claim of *La condition postmoderne* is that a generalized scepticism towards grand narratives is becoming increasingly characteristic of advanced capitalist societies.<sup>349</sup> Turning again to the later Wittgenstein’s theory of language games, Lyotard describes both the grand narratives which he claims are in decline, as well as the dispersion of narrative fragments following in their wake. Grand

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<sup>348</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2002, p.xxv [9].

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xxiii-xxiv [7-8].

narratives constitute particular games, which are stories positioning the players in a certain social relation and telling of the exploits of a “hero” (e.g. “Man”, “Knowledge”). They are “grand” or “meta” narratives to the extent that they bring other narratives and other games generally under their power (i.e. “account” for other games, be hegemonic with respect to them). Examples include the liberation of “Man” and the progressive attainment of knowledge by the (Humboldtian) university.<sup>350</sup> A sociological condition in which these are in decline implies both an opportunity – it heralds the possibility of living without nihilating-transcendent narratives – as well as a danger: instantiated as capitalism and post-political administration, a narrative of “performativity”, i.e. efficiency and usefulness, has proven able to survive the decline and now hegemonizes the newly-won dispersion.<sup>351</sup>

Like the grand narratives it outlasts, the regime of performativity is totalitarian to the extent that it by definition neutralizes events – this time in the name of efficiency, growth, complexification, security, etc. To be both impious and just in a condition of postmodernity implies distancing oneself from any such hegemonizing language game; hence, Lyotard’s refusal,<sup>352</sup> during the decline of Marxism in the 1970s, to side with the *nouveaux philosophes* and other handmaidens of victorious liberal capitalism, which thrives precisely on efficiency and therefore represents another variant of totalitarianism. Seemingly running short on political options at this point, Lyotard does however make a positive prescription as regards politics in the postmodern condition: since knowledge, in terms of data, is increasingly power, equal access to information banks would mean a levelling of power and would therefore be prerequisite to a true democracy.<sup>353</sup>

Despite catapulting Lyotard to intellectual fame, *La condition postmoderne* was and remains a controversial text, both in its specific sociological claims and its argumentative structure. While remarkably prescient in certain respects – for instance as regards the development of higher learning institutions and the increasing importance of information in the global economy – Lyotard loses many philosophical critics by arguing

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<sup>350</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.31-37 [49-53].

<sup>351</sup> *Ibid.*, p.41-53 [69-88]. Note that despite their significant differences, Lyotard is close to Habermas on this point, for whom instrumental reason has outstripped other forms of human reason and is now colonizing the lifeworld. See also Chapter 3.3 below.

<sup>352</sup> See especially Lyotard, *Instructions païennes*.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, p.67 [107-108]. Note that at this supposedly sceptical, nihilistic stage of his thought, Lyotard retains something of the radical egalitarianism of his past.

in the end for a democratization of access to information banks. He therein seems to assume an un-argued horizon of justice which has struck many interpreters as fundamentally incompatible with the basic thrust of his argument. Commentators have, at best, pointed out that *La condition postmoderne* assumes and requires exactly such a horizon; at worst, they have ignored his sustained attempt to provide one, and chalked the book up to a symptomatic sceptical or nihilistic tract.<sup>354</sup>

c.i) *A Refined New Material at Hand*

*Le différend*, published in 1983, constitutes Lyotard's major attempt to flesh out the horizon of justice promised in *Au juste* and *La condition postmoderne*; it is certainly his most mature attempt in the pagan/postmodern phase to articulate an ethical antihumanism, and is in any case one of his major philosophical statements – his prior texts from the mid 70s onwards being, on this view, mostly preparatory in nature. In 2.2 below, we will see how, precisely, Lyotard attempts in *Le différend* to provide the missing or at least largely incomplete horizon of these texts. But since we are presently concerned with his methodology, a good place to start with this text is the now familiar question: how, at this point in his development, does Lyotard conceive the material at hand?

The answer is, roughly, that he now thinks of the material at hand in terms of linguistic events. But this needs to be explained. First it should be noted that in *Le différend* he continues the investigation of language pragmatics launched in the pagan writings. But he now abandons the notion of language games: the notion of a game implies players, and to Lyotard this smacks of the humanism he wishes to avoid.<sup>355</sup> It is not necessary, on his view, to presuppose players as “users” of language, preceding it and putting it into play; rather, in his estimation, “‘We’ do not employ language”.<sup>356</sup> The postulate of a language-transcending ordinary language user is not necessary because ordinary language may be understood simply by recourse to “the principle clearly formulated by Wittgenstein himself for logical language: what is required to understand

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<sup>354</sup> My immense respect for Marxist critic of postmodernity David Harvey notwithstanding, his partial and seemingly cursory reading of Lyotard on this count is troubling. Cf. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Cambridge MA and Oxford UK, Blackwell Publishing, 2006.

<sup>355</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.91, p.55 [89].

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

the latter is not the experience that something behaves like this or that, but the presupposition that something *is* ... The logic of ordinary language, like logic, is prior to every experience.”<sup>357</sup>

In a manner of speaking, language, the material at hand, is always already<sup>358</sup> before the speech of the supposed “user” of language – language transcends the subject, which as we will see below, is a point that Lyotard must square with his war on transcendence. For now, the important thing to note is that in *Le différend*, Lyotard uses the resources of Wittgenstein’s thought to go beyond Wittgenstein in a radical way. Wittgenstein errs when he “half-opens the door of logic onto phenomenology”: he analogizes logical and perceptual negation while understanding the latter “on the model of the experience of the sensible by a subject (an eye)”.<sup>359</sup> Lyotard pursues Wittgenstein’s description of the logic of language while attempting to avoid making such analogies; language simply *is*, and it is this fact, rather than its use in the mouths (or hands) of human beings, that Lyotard takes as primary.

Wittgenstein’s influence having been noted, Lyotard’s debt to Kant in the postmodern philosophy of *Le différend* must also be emphasized. Lyotard begins from Kant’s division of human cognition into different faculties, such as imagination, reason, and the like. Where Lyotard differs from Kant is with respect to the notion that these are faculties, properly speaking – that is to say, that they are powers comprising a thinking subject. Rather, “faculties” are recast – roughly<sup>360</sup> – as the different phrase regimens (sets of rules), or as genres vying to determine the pertinence of linkages between phrases.<sup>361</sup> The “faculty” of judgment, not itself truly a faculty in Kant but rather a power of finding and inventing criteria, of settling boundary disputes and forging linkages between the true faculties, is interpreted by Lyotard in like manner: judgement, in the sense of reflective judgment seen above, is not a power exercised by a subject, but rather

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<sup>357</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.91, p.55 [89].

<sup>358</sup> See section 2.1.a above, as regards Lyotard’s debt to Heidegger and his similarities with Derrida.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., par.187, p.177 [199]: though now and then “certain overlappings are possible”, “Phrase regimens coincide neither with ‘faculties of the soul’ nor with ‘cognitive faculties’. Genres of discourse don’t coincide with them either”.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid., p.xii [10].

it is the fact of passage between faculties as such.<sup>362</sup> Hence Lyotard's exercise of investigating the material at hand is likewise de-anthropologized; it is an event, or a series of events linked together, a "pile of phrases".<sup>363</sup> It is not undertaken on the authority of a subject, i.e. by an "author". As in *Économie libidinale* and *Au juste*, Lyotard here disputes authorial responsibility in the strict sense (as shown, for instance, by his ironical remarks in the "Reading Dossier" which prefaces the work).

All told, Lyotard's creative appropriation of Wittgenstein and Kant amounts to a "philosophy of phrases" – a thought which holds linguistic events – "phrases"<sup>364</sup> – and the different "faculties" or rather rule-sets and genres vying to determine the pertinence of phrase linkage, as the material at hand. But to say that a phrase is a linguistic event requires comment, since the very term "linguistic events" becomes redundant at this stage: Lyotard conceives of "phrase" and "event" as in principle interchangeable terms. This widens the scope of the umbrella term "language" to cover every conceivable event (insofar as language is something occurring here, now, each time a phrase is uttered, not presupposing a transcendent structure of meaning). Gualandi admirably captures this aspect of Lyotard's philosophy of phrases in the title of his chapter on Lyotard's postmodernism: *Le langage sans dehors* ["language with no outside", or "language with nothing outside of it"].<sup>365</sup> Indeed, Lyotard emphasizes that the very idea of a universe *outside* of language, serving as the ground for phrases, transcending them, is necessarily presented in a phrase; hence a "pre-evental", transcendent universe, even transcendence itself, is actually a function of the event (it is inconceivable outside of the event, since everything is inconceivable outside of the event).<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Gérard Sfez, *Jean-François Lyotard, la faculté d'une phrase*, p.69: "La faculté des phrases ne présuppose pas de sujet, car la *force d'une phrase* est celle qu'elle apporte avec elle. Chaque phrase vient avec sa faculté, ses facultés." ("The faculty of phrases does not presuppose a subject, since the *power of a phrase* is that which it brings with itself. Each phrase arrives with its faculty, with its faculties.") In a similar antihumanist register, Robert Harvey interprets Lyotard as "positioning [the] 'I' as passage. 'I' am to become and remain passages everywhere I can, as plural as possible, taking care, all the while, that this 'I-as-passages' never favors the facile tendency to tidily fill the abyss over which passage is suspended. Not *creation* so much, then, as service at the passage by means of some yet unknown extensibility that should impel me to suspend the temptation to pass over" ("Telltale at the Passages", in Harvey and Schehr (eds.), *Yale French Studies Number 99: Jean-François Lyotard: Time and Judgment*, New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 2001, pp. 102-116).

<sup>363</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.xv [14].

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xi-xii [9].

<sup>365</sup> Gualandi, *Lyotard*, Chapter Three.

<sup>366</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, 39, p.28-29 [51].

Lyotard's postmodern philosophy thus posits the phrase, the event, as the basic material for thought, even more basic, paradoxically, than what is by definition a more basic universe in which a phrase could happen. But this means that one can speak plausibly here of a "phrase-based ontology"; if the phrase is the basic material for thought, is it not also, as far as thought can think, the bedrock of existence?

Gérald Sfez has expressed what I call Lyotard's phrase-based ontology in three succinct and helpful formulae. With reference to *Le différend*, I will presently expound upon Sfez's formulae and, where pertinent, note their limitations. By doing so, I hope to make the precise meaning of the preceding paragraphs clearer.

a) *L'Être est événement* (Being is event):<sup>367</sup>

Sfez's characterization is accurate to the extent that the event is for Lyotard the basic ontological unit. But what precisely does "basic ontological unit" mean here?

Lyotard gives an argument for the ontological priority of the event with reference to Cartesian doubt.<sup>368</sup> Descartes methodologically employed doubt to peel away any belief he was unsure of, so as to arrive at an indubitable foundation for science. What he found he could not doubt was the fact that he doubted; hence the doubting/thinking subject was the irreducible foundation he sought. Lyotard however disputes the claim that "the thinking or reflective I ... withstands the test of universal doubt".<sup>369</sup> He holds that "[i]t does not result from the phrase, *I doubt*, that I am, merely that there has been a phrase."<sup>370</sup> To say "I doubt" is to presuppose "*I* and *doubt* or *I* and *think* and so on. And each of these 'terms' presupposes in turn other phrases: definitions, examples of 'usage'".<sup>371</sup> In other words, each presupposes language, as the "totality of phrases possible in a language".<sup>372</sup> It should be noted though that this totality itself is not

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<sup>367</sup> Sfez, *Jean-François Lyotard, la faculté d'une phrase*, p.66.

<sup>368</sup> In his discussion of Descartes, Lyotard is also polemicizing against Apel, who tries in to put Descartes to use for the ultimate grounding of reason in "La question d'une fondation ultime de la raisonne", *Critique* 413, 1981, October, pp. 895-928.

<sup>369</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.94, p.59 [93].

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid, par.95, p.59 [93].

<sup>372</sup> Ibid., par.95, p.59 [93].

presentable (since the phrase “and this is language” is presumably part of language, but fails to refer to itself).<sup>373</sup>

Lyotard also points to the fact that to take “I doubt” (or any other particular phrase) as “first phrase” presupposes “the ordinal series of events from which the predicate *first* derives its sense”;<sup>374</sup> and this ordinal series results not from the phrase itself, but from “a general form of passage from one proposition to another”.<sup>375</sup> Hence “the affirmation that a phrase is first presupposes the temporal series of phrases of which this phrase presents itself as the first.”<sup>376</sup> For there to be a first phrase presupposes at least one other phrase already: that with reference to which it is first. In this respect, Lyotard notes that “I doubt” presupposes also “a prior phrase onto which it links”, namely, “*What is not doubtful?*”<sup>377</sup> This phrase, in turn, presupposes any number of other phrases such as “*I name this feeling ‘doubtful’*”, “*This is the definition of doubtful*” or “*Do you believe this?*” Each preceding phrase presupposes a prior phrase, *ad infinitum*; that is, each phrase opens onto an infinite regress. Hence logically speaking, there can be no “first phrase”.

It appears however that a slippage has occurred here, from “first phrase” as transcendent or grounding or guarantor phrase, which was Descartes’s object, to “first phrase” as temporally first phrase; Lyotard has perhaps shown that the latter is impossible, but has he shown the same of the former? Arguably this perceived slippage is not a problem for Lyotard. According to him, the transcendent/grounding/guarantor phrase, since it is a phrase, an event, is like the supposedly temporally first phrase, in being a function of other phrases; this means that transcendence is not a position distinct from phrases; *transcendence is immanent to phrases*.<sup>378</sup> And this means that transcendence is not really transcendence (being more like an illusion that arises within phrasing). In order to see how this argument works, we need to discuss the precise nature of a phrase – or, to put it differently, what is given in a phrase.

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid. Whether “and this is language, including the current phrase” is similarly problematic is an interesting question.

<sup>374</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.95, p.59 [93].

<sup>375</sup> Ibid.; Lyotard is here quoting Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.01.

<sup>376</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.95, p.60 [94].

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., par.96, p.60 [94].

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., par. 39, p.28-29 [51].

When a phrase happens, it presents at least one “universe”.<sup>379</sup> A universe is a concatenation or “situation”<sup>380</sup> of four pragmatic poles: *referent* (“what it is about, the case”), *sense* (“what is signified about the case”), *addressee* (“that to which or addressed to which this is signified about the case”), and *addressor* (“that ‘through’ which or in the name of which this is signified about the case”).<sup>381</sup> A universe is distinguished by how its four poles are situated: “The disposition of a phrase universe consists in the situating of these instances in relation to each other. A phrase may entail several referents, several senses, several addressees, several addressors. Each of these four instances may be marked [i.e. clearly indicated, or filled in by something definite] in the phrase or not.”<sup>382</sup>

A phrase presents a situation; it cannot, however, present its own presentation, which is to say, its presentation is not itself situated in the universe it presents.<sup>383</sup> The presentation of a phrase may nonetheless be marked in the universe it presents by *There is*; since ordinary language can refer to itself, a phrase like “There is a presentation in the current phrase” marks it, but does not strictly speaking present or situate it. The presentation entailed by a given phrase, however, may be situated in the universe of another phrase.<sup>384</sup> This is to say that when a phrase occurs, there is *what* it presents, as well as *that* it presents; the latter may be vaguely indicated in the phrase, but it can only be situated in another phrase (i.e. the fact that the phrase presented something becomes a referent in another phrase).

To return to the problem of how Lyotard can account for transcendence without violating his methodological materialism, consider the following. As we have seen, besides having an addressor and an addressee, any phrase has a referent and a sense, regardless of whether these are marked (i.e. the universe of a phrase will contain them as constituent parts, regardless of whether they are clear or obscure). Hence the universe of a phrase always pertains to something prior, even where the sense or referent of the latter is unmarked, i.e. unclear; specifically, a phrase, in presenting a universe, refers to another phrase, more accurately the universe presented by/in another phrase. This disposes of the

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<sup>379</sup> Ibid., par.111, p.70 [108].

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., par.115, p.70-71 [109].

<sup>381</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.25, p.14 [31].

<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., par.116, p.71 [109].

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

problem of the first phrase. But if there can be no first phrase, can there nonetheless be a “final phrase” (temporally speaking, or perhaps in the sense of a speculative summing-up)? Lyotard answers no. Neither first nor last, strictly speaking, is possible, since each presupposes a universe in which it is first or last – and this universe is the universe of another phrase.

What withstands the test of universal doubt is therefore neither doubt nor the thinking/reflective “I”, but rather, “time and the phrase”.<sup>385</sup> The bedrock of further philosophy is not the Cartesian subject, but rather the fact that there is a phrase; this fact, as we saw, implies time: “One phrase calls forth another, whichever it may be. It is this passage, time, and the phrase (the time in the phrase, the phrase in time) that survives the test of doubt”.<sup>386</sup>

Sfez is therefore, in a sense, right to say that for Lyotard Being is the event; the event is the “is-ness” (*qu’il y a*: that-there-is)<sup>387</sup> of what is, insofar as what is, is by virtue of being presented in a phrase-universe. But the event can only be called “Being” if we have in mind the specific Lyotardian sense of *Ereignis* and not some transcendent ground for particular beings, Heidegger’s “*transcendens* pure and simple”, but rather that which is entailed by presentation (i.e. that-there-is at least one universe, hence that-there-is at least one universe *and a [next] universe*).<sup>388</sup> The phrase itself “transcends” all particular beings, as well as transcendence itself, but we can only present this in a phrase. There is therefore nothing more basic than the phrase, including transcendence or the fact of its transcendence. A phrase happens, and anything that can be said about occurrence falls short of it. Lyotard here has a clearer articulation of the primacy of the singular than earlier in his career.

In Lyotard’s own words: “Could the presentation entailed by a phrase be called *Being*? But it is *one* presentation, or what in a phrase-case is the case. Being would be a case, an occurrence, the ‘fact’ that happens to ‘fall’, that it ‘comes running’...Not Being, but one being, one time”.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>385</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.94, p.59 [93].

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*, par.101, p.66 [102-103].

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, par.111, p.70 [108].

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, par.111, 115, p.70-71 [108-109].

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, par.113, p.70 [109].

b) *L'Être est enchaînement* (Being is linking):<sup>390</sup>

As we just saw, for there to be a phrase is necessary, since one cannot doubt that there is a phrase; also, there can be no first or last phrase since either could only be such within a phrase universe in which it was marked as “first” or “last” (hence neither would, really, be first or last). What this entails for Lyotard is that “[f]or there to be no phrase is impossible”, but also that “for there to be *And a phrase* is necessary”.<sup>391</sup> Put differently, Lyotard is arguing that since there is no last phrase, for every phrase, another phrase must follow.<sup>392</sup>

Granted, whereas “[t]o link is necessary”, “how to link is not”.<sup>393</sup> A man on the street asks me what time it is; I reply “It’s 6:30”, or “Sorry, my watch has stopped”, or “It’s time for you to get a watch”, or “Sorry, I don’t talk to strangers”. This means that Being, *Ereignis*, is not so much a matter of syntax, but “paratax”,<sup>394</sup> that is, Being is a matter of pure conjunction irrespective, and in any case logically and ontologically prior to, any notion of “suitable” or “pertinent” linkage between phrases.<sup>395</sup> The important thing, in any case, is that a phrase, the event, Being if we want to call it that, entails or contains as constituent of itself a linking.

Here one might make the obvious objection that a *silence* may follow a phrase; hence it would not appear that a phrase does in fact entail *And a phrase*. Lyotard argues, however, that “For *And a phrase* to be necessary signifies that the absence of a phrase (a silence, etc.) or the absence of a linkage (the beginning, the end, disorder, nothingness, etc.) are also phrases.”<sup>396</sup> According to Lyotard, the only thing that distinguishes such phrases from others is their “Equivocality” and their expression of “feeling”, of “wishes”.<sup>397</sup> A given silence is distinguished from other phrases by the fact that it presents a universe in an equivocal, mysterious way (or rather, it presents an equivocal, mysterious universe): in other words, it presents that there is something, but it does not

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<sup>390</sup> Sfez, *Jean-François Lyotard, la faculté d'une phrase*, p.67.

<sup>391</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.102, p.66 [103].

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid., par.100, p.65-66 [102].

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., par.41, p.29 [52].

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., par.105, p.68 [105]. This is to say that the purported “absence of a linkage” is not really the absence of a linkage; if it is a phrase, then it already implies a linkage (i.e. it implies a prior phrase and a next phrase).

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., par.105, p.68 [105].

clearly say/situate what it presents, nor does it say anything definite and/or positive about it.<sup>398</sup>

Elsewhere Lyotard states that silences are “substitutes for phrases”, insofar as they imply “negative phrases”.<sup>399</sup> A silence is a negative phrase insofar as it presents at least one universe, one or more equivocal concatenations of addressor, addressee, sense and referent, wherein one or more of these is negated, i.e. cannot be “presented in the current idiom”.<sup>400</sup> “The negative phrase that the silence implies could be formulated respectively: *This case does not fall within your competence* [negation with respect to addressee], *This case does not exist* [negation with respect to referent], *It cannot be signified* [negation with respect to sense], *It does not fall within my competence* [negation with respect to addressor]. A single silence could be formulated by several of these phrases.”<sup>401</sup> Hence a silence says something, even if the latter is not clear or definite, with respect to negation of one or more of the instances of the universe it presents.

Lyotard illustrates this with the frequently noted silence of Holocaust survivors. Their silence is a phrase, or quasi-/negative phrase, insofar as it links on to an existing phrase or phrases, and constitutes one or more universes. With the respect to how it stands in for one or more negative phrases, it “does not indicate which instance [i.e. which of the four pragmatic poles in a phrase universe] is denied, it signals the denial of one or more of the instances”.<sup>402</sup> It may signify that the *addressee* is unworthy to hear whatever is at issue, e.g. on the grounds of his or her incompetence, or that it isn’t his or her business; that the *referent*, the situation in question, e.g. murder in the gas chambers, did not occur; that the *sense* is elusive (“the situation is senseless, inexpressible”); that the *addressor* him-or-herself has no business or is not worthy to speak of it; or, “several of these negations together”.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Ibid., par.24-27, p.13-14 [30-31].

<sup>399</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.22/24, p.13 [29/30].

<sup>400</sup> Ibid., par.24, p.13-14 [30].

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., par.24, p.13 [30].

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., par.26, p.14 [31].

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., Lyotard points out that since the silence of Holocaust survivors may signal any of these four negations, in any concatenation, the conclusion of Holocaust deniers and revisionist historians such as Faurisson that their silence signals the absence of gas chambers *tout court* is fallacious (ibid., par. 27, p.14 [31]).

The challenge in linking onto a silence such as that of many Holocaust survivors is that one cannot *a priori* determine which of the “four silent negations” is operant in a given silence. Depending on the stakes one has in linking, this becomes particularly complicated; given the possibility of logical retreat or concession<sup>404</sup> on the part of Holocaust deniers, if one wants, for instance, to establish the existence of gas chambers, one must remove all four: “There were no gas chambers, were there? Yes, there were. – But even if there were, that cannot be formulated, can it? Yes, it can. – But even if it can be formulated, there is no one, at least, who has the authority to formulate it, and no one with the authority to hear it (it is not communicable), is there? Yes, there is.”<sup>405</sup> In pursuing this line of inquiry, moreover, one risks missing the point of one or more of the silent negations of the survivors, and hence wronging them (if a survivor truly indicates by her silence that she is incompetent or unworthy to give testimony, then how does one surmount this difficulty?). As I will suggest in section 2.2 below, such an approach to the Holocaust is highly problematic in its extreme rigour; though evidently not Lyotard’s intent, one might fairly question whether his rather sophisticated pragmatic argument bolsters in some way the cruder negationism of such historians as Faurisson.<sup>406</sup> In any case, such problems suggest how at this stage the question of linkage is for Lyotard the basic question of ethics.

With respect to less grave subject matters, the same reasoning consistently suggests that silence is a phrase, an event. To extend the discussion briefly, if one says “I love you” to someone, silence from that person could not be construed as the mere absence of a phrase. One would rightly interpret silence in this case to indicate something, perhaps something important. The silence of the person to whom I say “I love you” could signify that I am unloved, or unworthy of a reply (negation with respect to addressee); that she suffers from an inability to put her feelings into words (negation with

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<sup>404</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.15 [32]. As an example of logical retreat or concession Lyotard mentions the famous example of the borrowed kettle: “x: borrowed. – Gorgias: not borrowed. x: borrowed undamaged. – Gorgias: borrowed with a hole in it already. x: borrowed undamaged and returned with a hole in it. – Gorgias: returned undamaged.”

<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, par.27, p.14 [31].

<sup>406</sup> For an in-depth discussion of Lyotard, silence and the Holocaust, see Dorota Glowacka’s “Lending an Ear to the Silence Phrase: Lyotard’s Aesthetics of Holocaust Memory”. In Nouvet, Stahuljak and Still (eds.), *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, pp. 49-66.

respect to addressor); that what I have said to her is senseless, or that her own thoughts and feelings are senseless (negation with respect to sense); or that she simply does not believe me (negation with respect to referent). And such silences as hers, being phrases or quasi-phrases, imply further linkages: perhaps I repeat myself, perhaps I shift awkwardly in my seat, or am silent myself, or ask why she is silent, or change the subject: all phrases. I cannot avoid linking on to my interlocutor's silence; even my silence, following hers, would be a linking.

c) *L'Être est polémicos* (Being is conflict/contest):<sup>407</sup>

Being – which is to say the event, or each event, each time – implies “une dispute sur ce qui va s'ensuivre et une décision”: a dispute over what comes next, and a decision as to what comes next.<sup>408</sup> Linking is not simply a linking, but also a “slicing”, a “detriment”; to link in a certain way is to rule out an indefinite number of other linkages.<sup>409</sup> In Lyotard's own words, as we saw, “[t]o link is necessary, but how to link is not”.<sup>410</sup> This agonistic picture entails that reflective judgement – in the Kantian sense explored above – is in a manner of speaking, constituent of Being; at the very least, we can say that Being, the event, implies an unprincipled search, i.e. a search without rule, for how to link onto the event. To the extent that multiple genres of linking phrases lay claim to the phrase in question, judgment with respect to the next linkage is extremely complicated, tenuous, and, once effected, must carry with it a certain anxiety as to its justice or pertinence.

This anxiety signals something important. What has been said so far brings an element of negativity into the heart of phrasing and entails, on the face of it, a certain paradox with respect to Being as event. Since Being is event, which is to say linkage, which is to say *polémicos*, Being appears to entail Non-Being. On the one hand, the presentation entailed by a phrase is not itself presented by the phrase; there appears to be a cleavage in the phrase itself. On the other hand, each time a phrase happens, it also

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<sup>407</sup> Sfez, *Jean-François Lyotard, la faculté d'une phrase*, p.68.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> Ibid.

<sup>410</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.102, p.66 [103]. Notice again the performative contradiction: Lyotard is making a claim which presumably holds good for all events, i.e. a universal claim.

opens up an abyss between itself and the next phrase;<sup>411</sup> Being is event, which means Being is also the negativity entailed by the correlative notions “the previous event” and “the next event”, as well as that entailed by the battle to determine what, precisely, the next event will be. Being appears to imply that which it is, the phrase, as well as the presentation of the phrase which the phrase cannot itself present, as well as that which came before the phrase, and that which it is not yet but could be: Being is both Being and non-Being, or “Being is not.”<sup>412</sup>

Lyotard will have to address this implication, since if it is not a bare paradox, then it appears to set the dialectical wheels in motion; it may well lead us, *pace* Hegel, to the conclusion that Being is Becoming (and perhaps, ultimately, recuperable in/as a speculative-transcendent system). Lyotard responds to this worry by stating that

...when an entailed presentation [i.e. the presentation of the current phrase, or of the previous or next phrase] is presented, it is not an entailed but a situated presentation. Or: Being grasped as an existent is non-Being ... What Hegel calls determination and which is the mainspring of the passage from Being to non-Being is the situation of Being (or of presentation) in a phrase universe, that is, the passage from the presentation entailed by the first phrase to the presentation (of the first phrase) presented by the second phrase. This “disintegration” (the passage from Being to existent or non-Being) only works, however, if the stakes of the second phrase are to present the presentation ... There are many genres of discourse, though, whose stakes as prescribed by their rules do not involve presenting the presentation, and where “disintegration” is consequently not necessary.<sup>413</sup>

To phrase one’s anxiety over the negativity implied by a phrase or by the linkage between phrases is, in short, to have already situated the presentation of that phrase or the phrases in question; it is already to operate under the dictates of a particular genre and, as Lyotard is at pains to emphasize, there are multiple genres for which the situation of a phrase’s presentation and the “disintegration” this implies are not at issue. Lyotard’s strategy here is not so much to refute the claims of the speculative-ontological genre as to emphasize that it is heterogeneous with respect to other modes of linkage, and in any case is transcended by the event as such.

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., par.188, p.138 [200].

<sup>412</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par. 127, p.77 [118].

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., par.127, p.77-78 [118-119].

This, however, raises another problem: how can Lyotard appeal to the event this way, as in some way *determinant in the last instance*? In what sense can the event be the basis of an ontology that would even defuse speculative-ontological discourse? How, in short, could a philosophy of radical immanence contain and rely upon a transcendence at its very heart? As I've already suggested, an ontology of the event as such seems to imply that the event is transcendent upon the phrase-universe, i.e. the situated content of the event, as well as the linkages and the stable, temporally enduring structures which would issue from it. Lyotard attempts to grapple with this problem by showing that the relation of transcendence is actually immanent to the phrase-event.

To give an example of how transcendence is actually immanent to the phrase-event, consider space. Space is a transcendent condition of experience, as argued by Kant; however, according to Lyotard, “[t]here wouldn’t be any space ... independent of a phrase”.<sup>414</sup> Space erupts from nothingness into being, as a category marked by transcendence, in a universe presented by a phrase. Without space, certain contents of certain phrase universes would be doubtless inconceivable; but without there being a phrase, there would be no universe within which space would transcend such contents. The event of the phrase presents space as constitutive of a universe, but this means that the event transcends space: space itself is only an instance of transcendence within a phrase-universe, of which the pure “it happens” of the phrase is the transcendental condition. But lest this appear to contradict Lyotard’s methodological materialism, it should be noted that the transcendent relation of the phrase to space and its other transcendent instances only occurs with the phrase; hence, transcendence itself, far from being an *eternal* feature of Being, is a feature occurring each time, when there is a phrase. The transcendence of the phrase over the transcendences it presents as constituent parts of its universe happens only when a phrase happens. That a phrase must happen is necessary, but this necessity does not transcend the phrases which happen; rather, it is a function of the fact that-there-is a phrase (and in any case the pronouncement of necessity is the pronouncement of a meta-linguistic phrase, in the sense of a phrase about phrases).<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.120, p.76 [116].

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xiv [12].

What then of the other Kantian transcendental category of experience, time? Like space, Lyotard claims that there would not be time independent of a phrase.<sup>416</sup> But does this not seem counter-intuitive? A phrase happens, which is to say that “there are events: something happens which is not tautological with what has happened”.<sup>417</sup> Is time therefore a transcendent condition of happening? Lyotard disagrees: happening, in time, is itself utterable, “situable” one might say, only within the confines of a phrase universe. The phrase is an event. As *pure* event, i.e. as *presentation*, it does not occur in time; as the referent of a preceding, current or following phrase-event, i.e. as *situated*, it does (“That phrase that happened before this one”; “The phrase I am uttering”; “The phrase that will follow this one”). This entails that as pure event, the phrase cannot be captured – it cannot be transcended. But as the referent of another phrase, it is thus captured.

In sum, Lyotard’s methodological materialism in the mature pagan/postmodern writings yields a consistent philosophy of the event: the event, the singular, the phrase, has ontological priority; transcendence itself would be meaningless without it. I will now show how Lyotard’s antihumanism stands with respect to this newly formulated version of methodological materialism.

### c.ii) *Phrase-based Antihumanism*

In this section I will start by giving a short overview of Lyotard’s pagan/postmodern antihumanism. I will then move on to a deeper and more precise engagement with the philosophical moves he makes in order to purge his philosophy of humanism.

We can start by recalling certain features of the argument in *La condition postmoderne*. In that text, Lyotard diagnosed the sociological condition of postmodernity as a pervasive scepticism towards grand narratives. He notes the central ambiguity of sociological postmodernity. Not only is it characterized by a generalized turning away from traditional nihilating-transcendent narratives of human progress and emancipation (Marxism, liberal humanism), but also the rise and hegemony of a grand narrative of

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<sup>416</sup> Ibid., par.120, p.76 [116].

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., par.132, p.79 [120].

“performativity”: a narrative legitimating, i.e. nihilating events to the extent that they maximize performance.

The narrative of performativity might seem to give pride of place to the human, since efficiency would seem to imply a consumer or subject-of-administration for whom it is beneficial. But in its underlying logic, argues Lyotard, performativity is a form of antihumanism. It certainly indexes a falling into disrepute of “the human” since its “hero” is not the human race, but the development and complexification of capitalist techno-science *itself* (which Lyotard often calls “system”). This will be obvious to anyone who has thought about the irrational distribution of the world’s resources and research priorities, or the simple but related fact that the efficiency of markets thrives on the irrationality and sometimes bald self-destructiveness of human behaviour. As we will explore further in Chapter 3, the antihumanism of performativity is also related to the fact that the solar system will undergo heat death in 4.5 billion years. If thought is to survive after the end of the solar system, it is not obvious how or even whether human beings must figure into this equation; granting speculations and concrete advancements in the field of artificial intelligence, Lyotard suggests that solving the problem of escaping heat death is logically distinct from the problem of human survival.<sup>418</sup>

This techno-scientific antihumanism is nonetheless significantly different from Lyotard’s. Whereas Lyotard attacks transcendent notions of the human in the name of singularity (including singularity that happens to be human), the narrative of performativity seeks to neutralize and deploy singularity for the functioning of the system, by anticipating, recuperating and utilizing events. This narrative is antihumanist in a double sense: first, the human is not the conceptual/moral centre of the universe, and second, to the extent that human beings are singularities, their event-ness is to be neutralized by being employed in the service of development/complexification. But this means that the narrative of performativity is a form of nihilating religiosity of the type that Lyotard had sought to be finished with. The sociological condition of postmodernity

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<sup>418</sup> See Lyotard, “Can Thought go on Without a Body?” in *The Inhuman*, and “A Postmodern Fable” in *Postmodern Fables*.

presents us, therefore, with a strange hybrid: a grand narrative that is simultaneously antihumanist and nihilating-religious.<sup>419</sup>

So what, precisely, are the characteristics of the specific antihumanism that Lyotard advocated in his postmodern phase, against both the humanism of the *nouveaux philosophes* and Habermasians on the one hand, and the nihilating-religious antihumanism of postmodern technoscience on the other? The answers are to be found in *Le différend*. Recall that therein, Lyotard conceives of the material at hand as the phrase, which constitutes in turn an infinite number of prior and possible posterior phrases. The phrase, presenting a universe comprising four pragmatic poles, marked or unmarked, therefore implies a multiplicity of such universes prior and posterior to itself. As I have argued, it is not inappropriate to speak of a phrase-based ontology here, as the phrase and the time it implies become the bedrock of any claims about the universe, insofar as they alone pass the test of Cartesian doubt. But even if we grant this, does the human capacity for language not seem to designate “phrasing” as a natural province of the human being, perhaps one in which the human being stands as a transcendent principle?

Lyotard’s phrase-based ontology, like the prior libidinal monism, needn’t put the human being at its conceptual centre. First, there is the loss of the human privilege insofar as the addressor instance is concerned; the aforementioned placing of non-anthropocentric events under the sign of “phrase”, such as “a tiny speck to the West rising upon the horizon of the sea”, or a silence, would suggest that one needn’t be a human being to present a four-poled universe.<sup>420</sup> On this count it is also worth noting what Lyotard says about animals in *Le différend*. In par. 38, he describes the animal as “a paradigm of the victim”, for the reason that it cannot bear witness “according to the human rules for establishing damages”,<sup>421</sup> the animal phrases its suffering under the butcher’s knife, but it is not heard as suffering or, in any case, as conveying anything worth hearing. In another place, Lyotard discusses the wag of a cat’s tail as a phrase.<sup>422</sup> Both the animal on the slaughter bench and the cat wagging its tail present a four-poled universe, though admittedly not every pole is marked (e.g. it is not clear what the sense of

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<sup>419</sup> It bears emphasizing that antihumanism is not automatically free of nihilistic religiosity; for instance, deep ecology rejects humanism but also nihilates the individual human in the name of “nature”.

<sup>420</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.110, p.70 [108].

<sup>421</sup> *Ibid.*, par.38, p.28 [50].

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, par.123, p.76-77 [117].

the wagged tail is, but it is not illegitimate *a priori* to suppose or to ponder whether there is one). These comments on non-human events and animals demonstrate that Lyotard's philosophy of phrases is not human-centric insofar as the addressor instance is concerned: more than that, in fact, he challenges the reader to "try to come up with nonhuman entities who could not occupy one or another of [the four pragmatic] instances".<sup>423</sup>

One might ask here, however, whether such comments are not still too anthropocentric. In the case of animals, for instance, do they not imply an animal *subject* (analog of the human subject) who phrases (an animal addressor)? Furthermore, is not a human addressee of the animal phrase, i.e. a human subject, also assumed? As regards a silence, or "a tiny speck to the West rising upon the horizon of the sea", how can this constitute a phrase event at all if not experienced by precisely such a subject? Can Lyotard legitimately claim to have escaped anthropocentrism?

Lyotard attempts to dispel these doubts. In *Le différend*, as in *Économie libidinale*, he attempts a thorough de-centring of the subject from the place of privilege it has enjoyed in Western philosophy; this constitutes the philosophical centre of his phrase-based antihumanism. Lyotard states that "[t]he universe presented by a phrase is not presented to something or to someone like a 'subject'. The universe is there as long as the phrase is the case. A 'subject' is situated in a universe presented by a phrase."<sup>424</sup> This means that the subject is necessarily a function (better put, an effect) of the phrase, which is to say the event; "[the phrase] wasn't waiting for you. You come when it arrives."<sup>425</sup> Lyotard is consistent here with his privileging of the event over transcendence, of which the subject has often stood as an instance in (humanist) philosophical discourse. Indeed, even when the subject is said to be one which does not really belong to or in other words transcends its world, e.g. the "thinking I in Descartes, transcendental Ego in Husserl, source of the moral law in Kant, subject in Wittgenstein ... this subject is nevertheless situated in the heart of the universe presented by the philosophical phrase that says it does not belong to the world."<sup>426</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid., par.123, p.77 [117].

<sup>424</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend.*, par.119, p.71 [110].

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., par.173, p.116 [171].

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., par.119, p.71-72 [110].

In other words: the subject's supposed transcendence is actually immanent to the universe presented by a phrase; as we saw earlier, "transcendence [itself] is a situation immanent to the universe presented by the phrase that states it".<sup>427</sup> This puts Lyotard at variance with the transcendental claims of phenomenology, since for the latter, the subject transcends the phenomena (the events, the phrases) which it "intends" (in the sense that phenomena are "for" the subject). This, however, is consistent with Lyotard's previous break with programmatic (as opposed to loosely "stylistic") phenomenology, which we saw in Chapter 1. More importantly, the claim that transcendence is immanent to the universe presented by a phrase puts Lyotard at odds with both Wittgenstein and Kant, which at first blush is a problem insofar as he claims them as his forebears.<sup>428</sup> Lyotard must clarify how, precisely, he is able to retain what he wishes from Wittgenstein and Kant, while purging their thought of humanistic elements.

With respect to Wittgenstein, Lyotard notes that in the *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, Wittgenstein "half-opens the door of logic onto phenomenology".<sup>429</sup> This in turn is "a success for anthropomorphism, a defeat for thought".<sup>430</sup> To understand these related claims, we need to look at Lyotard's understanding of perceptual vs. logical negativity, and how Wittgenstein confuses them.

Phenomenology implies experience, and as Lyotard explains in *Discours, figure*, experience implies and bears witness to a particular negation or negativity which is immanent to the visible.<sup>431</sup> This negation or negativity is borne out by the variability (in the seen) which obtains in seeing.<sup>432</sup> The eye is, in a certain respect, at odds with what it sees; but this is not because the eye is beholden to Kantian categories of experience which filter a noumenal object into a phenomenon.<sup>433</sup> Rather, whatever the eye sees also

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<sup>427</sup> Ibid., par.119, p.72 [111].

<sup>428</sup> It is important to clear this up in the case of both thinkers, but Lyotard expresses a particularly strong affinity for Kant: an article of Lyotard's from 1982 is entitled "Réponse à la question: qu'est-ce que le postmoderne?" ("An answer to the question: what is the postmodern?") in *The Postmodern Explained*. This is clearly homage to Kant's "An answer to the question: what is Enlightenment?" It also sets Lyotard up as something of a postmodern Kant, a project Lyotard also flags in the Reading Dossier of *Le différend*.

<sup>429</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.91, p.55 [89].

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.

<sup>431</sup> Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, p.27.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.

<sup>433</sup> Ibid., p.41.

implies and gives way to what the constantly moving eye,<sup>434</sup> at a given point in time, does not see; the variability of the seen shows this to be so (as does the very concept of variability, which itself implies negativity). Since variability is experienced here as variability in the sensible itself, Lyotard explains that this negativity is thinkable as a distance or rupture which obtains between what is sensed and what is sensible: “La négativité qui ouvre sa distance entre l’oeil et l’objet est celle de la forme, non celle de la catégorie. Le sensible est dans un écart insuppressible avec le sensé [“The negativity which opens its distance between the eye and the object is that of the form, not that of the category {i.e. in the Kantian sense}. The sensible is at an irrepressible distance/rupture with the sensed”].”<sup>435</sup>

Saying much the same in *Le différend*, Lyotard suggests that an ostensive (a phrase whose referent is an “object of perception”)<sup>436</sup> implies a negation with respect to its sense: “*This page is white (seen from here) and is not white (seen from there, it is gray)*”.<sup>437</sup> In phenomenology, the perceptive field is “hollowed out” by negation which is “entailed ... by the shown”; in the language of *Le différend*, an ostensive is hollowed out by senses other than the current sense (the sense of the current ostensive phrase).<sup>438</sup> Just as he argued in *Discours, figure* that a radical distance/rupture obtains between the sensed and the sensible, Lyotard states here that “A ‘swarm’ of possible senses, of indeterminate quantity and quality, inhabit this ‘hollow’”.<sup>439</sup>

Where the early Wittgenstein went wrong, according to Lyotard, was in transferring “into the logical order the ‘hollow’, which, in the (sensible) field, envelops the referents of ostensives”; in drawing an analogy between logical and perceptual (“perceptive”) negation.<sup>440</sup> The phenomenologist “elaborates the ideas of [perceptual] field and experience” by analysing the universes of ostensive phrases, and as we have seen, these imply a negativity characterized as a multiplicity of possible senses.<sup>441</sup> The “object of experience” arises in the field as elaborated by the phenomenologist, which

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<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, p.41.

<sup>436</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.83, p.51 [82].

<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid.

<sup>439</sup> Ibid.

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., par.91, p.55 [88-89].

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., par.81, p.50 [82].

constitutes “a loose complex of ostensives with deictics”.<sup>442</sup> The sense of an ostensive is thus relative to the field within which it is an ostensive. But “field” and “ostensive” further imply an addressee, a “subject of experience” for whom the sense and possible senses are. This does not imply that a phenomenological subject transcends the event; rather, as noted, the phenomenologist has constructed the former from the universes of ostensive phrases.

The logician, on the other hand, deals in propositions, and these have their own “logical sense of sense”.<sup>443</sup> Propositions occupy “logical space”, defined as the totality of relations between elementary propositions (“calculated by means of truth tables”).<sup>444</sup> The borders of logical space are tautology and contradiction; while still propositions, they are devoid of sense because they are necessarily true or necessarily false, respectively (“they teach nothing”).<sup>445</sup> For a proposition to have sense, it must leave open the possibility of being either true or false; in principle, its truth value must admit to being settled by testing the proposition against reality, against “extralinguistic facts”.<sup>446</sup> Like the perceptual sense of sense, therefore, the logical sense of sense implies possibility.<sup>447</sup> The analogy between perceptual and logical space, both of which imply possibility and hence, negation, can thus be drawn by erroneously positing a subject for whom logical space “appears”; this is what Wittgenstein does when he “metaphorizes the encounter of possible sense with reality as the exercise of a representational (essentially optical) constraint over what can be grasped from a world of extralinguistic facts”.<sup>448</sup>

This concession to phenomenology on the part of the early Wittgenstein has important consequences: “phenomenology is what, uncontrolled, and with the pretext of the ‘description of experience,’ will command his later research. An I will be presumed to make ‘use’ of language, to ‘play’ it with ‘another’ or ‘others’”.<sup>449</sup> This is problematic for Lyotard precisely because “[y]ou don’t play around with language ... [a]nd in this sense,

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

<sup>443</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.84, p.51 [83].

<sup>444</sup> Ibid.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

<sup>446</sup> Ibid., par.86, p.52 [84].

<sup>447</sup> Ibid.

<sup>448</sup> Ibid.

<sup>449</sup> Ibid., par.91, p.55 [89].

there are no language games”.<sup>450</sup> Rather, “[t]here are stakes tied to genres of discourse”; this implies conflict, but “not between human beings or between any other entities; rather, these [human and other beings] result from phrases”.<sup>451</sup> Ultimately, phenomenology is a genre of discourse; and genres, to the extent that they “seduce” phrase universes to open onto certain linkages,<sup>452</sup> are “modes of forgetting the nothingness or forgetting the occurrence, they fill the void between phrases”.<sup>453</sup> Under the influence of phenomenology, Wittgenstein forgets the singularity of the event, and nihilates the latter in an attempt to provide a particular “description of experience” under the aegis of language use.<sup>454</sup>

Notwithstanding Wittgenstein’s shortcomings in this regard, Lyotard draws important impetus from his investigations into logic and ordinary language. As stated in the Reading Dossier, “The free examination of phrases leads to the (critical) dissociation of their regimens”, in Wittgenstein’s case “the disentanglement of language games”; what remains is to purge this nascent departure from nihilistic religiosity of its nihilistic-religious recourse to the notions of games and use.<sup>455</sup> To do this, one must turn to “the principle clearly formulated by Wittgenstein himself for logical language: what is required to understand the latter is not the experience that something behaves like this or that, but the presupposition that something *is*. ‘That, however, is not an experience’. The logic of ordinary language, like logic, is ‘prior to every experience’”.<sup>456</sup> Put differently, the notion of logical space, because it admits *that* there are facts, but does not and need not specify *what* those facts are, touches upon the *il y a*, the *there is* which Lyotard holds as ontologically basic; what remains to be recognized, after Wittgenstein, is that the same can be said of ordinary language: phrases *are*, they present, and this is more basic than *what* they present.

Wittgenstein, despite succumbing to nihilistic religiosity in the form of a phenomenological or phenomenology-inspired pragmatics, makes an important step towards recognizing that ordinary language, conceived as the diaspora of phrases, is an

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<sup>450</sup> Ibid., par.188, p.137 [199].

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., par.148, p.84 [128].

<sup>453</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.188, p.138 [200].

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., par.91, p.55 [89].

<sup>455</sup> Ibid., p.xiii [12].

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., par.91, p.55 [89].

ontologically basic and therefore inhuman regulative Idea. Thus, he furnishes certain tools for thinking “an honourable postmodernity”<sup>457</sup> – namely, the supposition that, before any question of use, logic and ordinary language *are* – but at the same time fails to go far enough. He lapses into a kind of modernism because, starting from scratch, in the material at hand like the phenomenologist does, he nonetheless assumes a transcendent subject. That is why for Lyotard, Wittgenstein is not so much a properly *postmodern* figure as an “[epilogue] to modernity and [prologue] to an honourable postmodernity”.<sup>458</sup> It remains to be seen how Lyotard is able to make the same claim about Kant, his other most important intellectual predecessor in *Le différend*.

With respect to Kant, we can start with the notion of presentation. Lyotard argues that the notion of presentation implied by a phrase is not to be confused, as it is in Kant’s notion of presentation, *Darstellung*, with a “given”.<sup>459</sup> A given is necessarily given *to a subject*, whereas a presentation “is the event of its (inapprehensible) presence”.<sup>460</sup> In fact, whereas a presentation is nothing other than the event-ness of a phrase, or the fact of a phrase’s happening, of its presenting a universe, the notion of a given formulated by Kant as *Darstellung* already implies two phrases.<sup>461</sup> In a given, an unknown addressor in the first place (quasi-)phrases something, it “speaks matter ... to an addressee receptive to this idiom, and who therefore understands it, at least in the sense by which he or she is affected by it”; in other words, something is phrased in which only the addressee instance is marked.<sup>462</sup> Then follows a second moment, wherein this addressee, this subject, “passes into the situation of addressing instance and addresses the phrase of space-time [i.e. the Kantian categories of the Transcendental Aesthetic], the form phrase, to the unknown addressor of the first phrase, who thereby becomes an addressee”.<sup>463</sup>

This second phrase, called intuition “in the Kantian lexicon”, “applies deictic markers onto the impressions procured by sensation” (i.e. an indistinct sensation becomes a referent locatable in space-time).<sup>464</sup> Intuition transforms a feeling into a phenomenon,<sup>465</sup>

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<sup>457</sup> Ibid., p.xiii [11].

<sup>458</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.xiii [11].

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., p.61 [96].

<sup>460</sup> Ibid., p.61 [96].

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., p.62 [97].

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> Ibid.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

but thereby “the ‘first’ addressor ..., the one who affects the subject through sensation, remains unknown to the latter”.<sup>466</sup> This is because the subject links onto the “first” phrase, which was phrased in the idiom of matter (I would suggest “material”, as in the material at hand), with its own idiom (space-time). Hence, Kant’s distinction between phenomenon and noumenon: the latter is the unknown material which is, so to speak behind and before the intuition implied by *Darstellung*, by a given.<sup>467</sup>

The crucial thing to retain from this account of *Darstellung* is that “[t]he ‘immediacy’ of the given ... is not immediate”.<sup>468</sup> *Darstellung*, “presentation” in the Kantian idiom, is in Lyotard’s view a misnomer: “[w]ith Kant, a *Darstellung* is not presentation, it is a situating”, i.e. it conceives the pragmatic instances implied by a presentation in a particular configuration (it is a matter of *what* is phrased, not the brute fact *that* there has been a phrase).<sup>469</sup> Since *Darstellung* denotes a given, it already implies phrases, and hence, it already implies a logically and ontologically prior notion of presentation (specifically, Lyotard’s).

*Darstellung* is therefore far from basic; it is “the conjunction of two phrases from different regimens”, “in general, an adjoining, a conjoining, a setting side by side, a comparison, between an established or an unknown rule and an intuition (or whatever takes the place of an intuition)”.<sup>470</sup> Two things are implied by this. First, Kant’s Transcendental Aesthetic does not reach bedrock; there is something logically and ontologically prior to the interpretation of the noumena under the categories of space-time made by the subject, and this, precisely, is presentation, the phrase qua event. Kant thus falls prey to a “metaphysical illusion” which “consists in treating a presentation like a situation”; “[t]he philosophy of the subject” which Kant espouses “lends itself to this”, and so must be severely critiqued.<sup>471</sup>

As an aside, it is interesting to note here that Lyotard’s account of Kant thus far is basically similar to those put forth by Habermas and Apel; all three criticize Kant’s ultimately solipsistic account of the subject, and all three attempt further to transform it

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid. [97-98]

<sup>467</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.62 [97-98].

<sup>468</sup> Ibid. [97]

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., p.65 [101].

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., p.64 [100].

<sup>471</sup> Ibid., p.61 [96].

through a linguistic turn. The irony, of course, is that with respect to the notion of the human they derive opposite conclusions: Lyotard is an antihumanist whereas Habermas and Apel remain humanists.

To return to the argument, *Darstellung* also implies a “passage apparatus”,<sup>472</sup> a generalized “power” of the subject to effect passages between heterogeneous phrase regimens (i.e. as was the case in the aforementioned passage from sensation to determinant judgment via intuition – specifically, the linking on to sensation from within the idiom of space-time). Lyotard explains this general passage apparatus as follows: “The subject presents an object before a rule, determined or not, with a view to validating this rule, or discovering it, or evaluating the object. The presentation does not come from anywhere other than the subject [i.e. as we saw, the presentation is more accurately a given, a situating], it is the confrontation of the subject’s works with other works by the subject, except that their joining together, whether regulated or not, takes place between heterogeneous faculties, that is, between phrases subject to different regimens or genres.”<sup>473</sup>

Recall here that Kant splits the subject into faculties (reason, imagination), whereas Lyotard conceives of these as, roughly at best,<sup>474</sup> phrases obeying particular regimens (sets of rules) or genres (stipulating ends or stakes determining linkages between phrases obeying heterogeneous regimens as pertinent or not, opportune or not).<sup>475</sup> Kant’s problem was how to account for the presence of heterogeneous faculties in a single subject, and he endeavored to solve it in the *Critique of Judgment*; Lyotard’s problem is how, with respect to the fact that there is a plurality of genres, to judge passages or rather “linkages” between phrases obeying heterogeneous regimens (i.e. the question of a “just linkage”). The difference is crucial: whereas Kant assumes and therefore must preserve the faculty notion of a subject, Lyotard must only account for a power or, more accurately a genre which allows for passages between heterogeneous regimens and genres by freely examining their rules, their compatibilities, and their incompatibilities.

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<sup>472</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.64 [100].

<sup>473</sup> Ibid.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid., par.187, p.177 [199].

<sup>475</sup> Ibid., p.xii [10].

Against Kant, one can ask: how, precisely, is the subject, as an architectonic or faculty unity, able to affect passages *within itself*? This would seem to entail a further “faculty” of effecting passages between faculties – but then who, or what, would be making (or would constitute) the reflective judgments that this “faculty” would seem to imply? For Lyotard, the Kantian subject is “neither active nor passive, it is both; but it is only one or the other insofar as, caught in the regimen of phrases, it pits itself against a phrase from another regimen, and seeks, if not their reconciliation, then at least the rules for their conflict, namely, the subject’s forever threatened unity”.<sup>476</sup> But Lyotard uses the word “subject” in two different senses in this passage: the subject [reflective judgment] is that which seeks to formulate and/or tentatively bridge the disunity of the subject [broader faculty Kantian subject]. The Kantian faculty subject would seem, then, to imply a logically prior subject, whose function is to effect passages and hence hold the greater faculty architecture together. Accordingly, Kant seeks in the *Critique of Judgment* to explain how the faculty of judgment holds the subject together.

This is perhaps not inconceivable; Lyotard suggests, however, that the “prior” or minimal subject,<sup>477</sup> the “faculty” of judgment which effects such passages, does not necessarily serve this harmonizing function. Indeed, when effecting a passage between heterogeneous regimens or genres (i.e. Kant’s “faculties”), the minimal, judging subject is always “caught in one regimen of phrases” or another and is therefore charged with the paradoxical task of seeking their reconciliation or at least the rules of the conflict from within the purview of a particular set of rules.<sup>478</sup> Sentiment seems to be an exception, since therein the subject “receives” something from a noumenal outside; we already saw, however, that this “giving” is already “transformed into a moment of exchange” by the phrasing of space-time.<sup>479</sup>

It is here that Lyotard turns to Kant’s analytic of the sublime for a stark demonstration of how the working of judgment, the “passage apparatus”, bears witness to the heterogeneity of the faculties of the Kantian subject. Lyotard suggests that the

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<sup>476</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.65 [100-101].

<sup>477</sup> In Lyotard’s later terminology the “anima minima” or “minimal soul” (see “Anima Minima” in *Postmodern Fables*). Note the tension between the view of minimal subject as “apparatus” on the one hand, and fact of passage (see footnote 362) on the other.

<sup>478</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.64-65 [100-101].

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, p.65 [101].

sublime sentiment, described by Kant as a dispute between the faculty of reason and that of imagination, and supposedly resolved in favour of the unity of the subject, both fatally undermines the philosophy of the subject and trumps the speculative genre (i.e. Hegel).<sup>480</sup> While the second claim is as bold as it is fascinating, I will here restrict my attention to the first for reasons of scope and relevance.

According to Kant, natural scenes such as wind-tossed oceans and mountain ranges may call forth an immediate intuition of infinite magnitude or force or both. The *mathematically* sublime sentiment arising from such scenes begins from the fact that through reason one may realize that the concept of largeness and the numeric series may, logically if not logistically, be infinitely extended.<sup>481</sup> One may therefore arrive at an intuition or Idea of infinite magnitude without being capable of presenting this magnitude (i.e. imagining it, or re-presenting it for another, as a totality). The *dynamically* sublime sentiment, on the other hand, is such that through reason one may conceive of infinite force without, likewise, being capable of presenting it.<sup>482</sup>

In both cases, the subject is repelled<sup>483</sup> since there is something of which it can conceive but cannot present, hence a rupture between the subject and that which it feels and thinks, an anxiety of alienation and insignificance in the face of the infinite; however, Kant argues that the subject is also attracted, fascinated or pleased<sup>484</sup> in both cases of the sublime sentiment since the realization that reason can conceive of the un-presentable puts the subject in some sense above finite nature (since it has a kind of negative access to the rational harmony which it infers must lie beyond or underpin nature).<sup>485</sup> The sublime is thus an agitated mixture of pleasure and pain in the spectator,<sup>486</sup> and can be considered a negative presentation of the un-presentable (i.e. a presentation that-there-is, *qu'il y a de l'imprésentable*, even though the un-presentable itself cannot be presented). For Kant, then, the infinite or “something like an Absolute, either of magnitude or of power”, “the object of an Idea of Reason”, is rendered “quasi-perceptible” in the sublime

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<sup>480</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.126, p.77 [118].

<sup>481</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, p.106-119.

<sup>482</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, p.123-129

<sup>483</sup> Read *pace* Lyotard: a spasm in what is called “subject” occurs.

<sup>484</sup> Read *pace* Lyotard: a pleasure in what is called “subject” occurs.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109-110, 119.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, p.119-120.

situation.<sup>487</sup> It is important to emphasize that it is not the natural scenes occasioning this mix of pleasure and pain themselves which are sublime, but rather this negative presentation which is a mixture of pleasure and pain, rooted as it is in the interplay between reason and the faculty of imagination/presentation.<sup>488</sup>

For Kant, it is natural scenes of chaos that best provoke feelings of the sublime in the spectator, since disarray and devastation, on a great scale, call to mind intuitions of both absolute or infinite magnitude (the mathematically sublime sentiment) and of absolute or infinite force (the dynamically sublime sentiment). In short, presentations of great chaos, since these best call forth both the mathematically and the dynamically sublime, suggest to the subject that-there-is (*qu'il y a*) something which is unrepresentable. There is of course a perceptual distance proper to such intuitions; the spectator must stand out of harm's way, lest the sublime sentiment give way to panic or cringing fear.<sup>489</sup>

Interestingly, Kant's historico-political writings belong in the orbit of the analytic of the sublime as well. The enthusiasm of the safely distant spectators of great political upheavals, who nonetheless run the risk of censure from their own autocratic governments for expressing it,<sup>490</sup> counts as a negative presentation of the unrepresentable infinite or at least indefinite moral potential of the human race and the unknowable historical logic underlying it: "[the French Revolution] ... finds in the hearts of all spectators (who are not engaged in this game themselves) a wishful participation that borders on enthusiasm, the very expression of which is fraught with danger; this sympathy, therefore, can have no other cause than a moral predisposition in the human race".<sup>491</sup> As Lyotard points out with regard to enthusiasm,

as an extreme case of sublime affection, its value as a political sign is undeniable according to Kant. For the experience of the sublime feeling

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<sup>487</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.136 [148]. Note the talk of Absolutes; Rudolphe Gasché unpacks the ontological dimensions of the analytic of the sublime in "The Sublime, Ontologically Speaking", in Harvey and Schehr (eds.), *Yale French Studies Number 99: Jean-François Lyotard: Time and Judgment*. New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 2001, pp. 117-128.

<sup>488</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, p.103: "...in general we express ourselves incorrectly if we call any *object of nature* sublime ... All that we can say is that the object is fit for the presentation of a sublimity which can be found in the mind; for no sensible form contains the sublime properly so-called."

<sup>489</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, p.124-125.

<sup>490</sup> Kant has in mind e.g. German enthusiasm for the French Revolution; a contemporary example would be Saudi enthusiasm for the Tunisian/Egyptian events of early 2011.

<sup>491</sup> Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties (Der Streit der Fakultäten)*, Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 1992, p.153. See Lyotard's *L'enthousiasme* for a close analysis of Kant's philosophy of history.

demands a sensitivity to Ideas that is not natural but acquired through culture. Humanity must be cultivated (and thus in a state of progress) to be able to feel, even in the crime perpetrated by the Jacobins, the “presence” of the unrepresentable Idea of freedom.<sup>492</sup>

However, as we saw in the Introduction, Kant’s notion of indexes of progress in history, “signs of history” or “historical signs”,<sup>493</sup> is employed by Lyotard in such a way as to index failures and to nourish historical pessimism.<sup>494</sup> Interestingly enough, melancholia with respect to history may itself indicate a kind of human progress, since it would betray a human sensitivity to the chasm between Ideas and realities, and hence to the Ideas themselves.<sup>495</sup> Lyotard worries, however, that under pressure from “the economic genre” – i.e. time is money, abandonment of the humanities for business/technical degrees and so on – “culture, as a consumer of time, ought to be eliminated. Humans will no longer feel even sorrow before the incommensurability between realities and Ideas. They will become more and more competent at strategies of exchange, but exclusively so”.<sup>496</sup>

Though he discusses the sublime in terms of nature and history, Kant scarcely treats feelings of the sublime provoked by human artifice except for remarks in passing about the great pyramids and St. Peter’s Basilica.<sup>497</sup> These remarks are confined to speculations on a variation of the aforementioned proper perceptual distance, i.e. that at which one must view the monuments so as to experience the sublime sentiment; one can’t be too far or else the scale of magnitude is not evident, and one cannot be too close or else by the time the eye takes in the full monument the parts taken in earliest will have been extinguished from the imagination and there will be no immediate, holistic intuition of infinite magnitude.<sup>498</sup>

We can note that Lyotard’s contribution here is in pushing Kant further along this line of thinking, and applying the analytic of the sublime to aesthetic judgments of contemporary avant-garde fine arts. For Lyotard, contemporary art invokes the sublime

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<sup>492</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, p.71 [106].

<sup>493</sup> Kant, *On History*, p.143.

<sup>494</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, p.28-29 [49-51].

<sup>495</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.259, p.180 [259].

<sup>496</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.260, p.181 [259].

<sup>497</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p.112.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.* Kant of course did not travel outside of his hometown and had no first-hand experience of the monuments of which he speaks.

sentiment insofar as the ideas in which it trades outstrip the medium of presentation (i.e. the canvas, the photograph, etc.).<sup>499</sup> This is in fact the function of the artistic avant-garde: continuously questioning the media of presentation and pushing the boundaries of art further towards the unrepresentable (and by extension continuously challenging art's inevitable co-option by the market or, to invoke Adorno, the "culture industry"). This pushing-further can be expressed in a number of ways, from the dovetailing of art with philosophy (conceptual art) or the abandonment of art *for* the pursuit of philosophy, to the abandonment of the canvas for such avenues as body-art, environmental art, performance, the "happening", etc. Avant-garde artistic practice becomes increasingly important to Lyotard near the end of his life, as will be briefly discussed in the following chapter.

Ultimately, according to Lyotard, Kant's analytic of the sublime undermines the subject as conceived in the Transcendental Aesthetic, because it presents a case wherein the faculties of the subject are in irresolvable dispute. Kant's term for this dispute is *Widerstreit*, which Lyotard renders in French as *différend* (this concept, perhaps Lyotard's most important, will be further explored in section 2.2 below). Lyotard's whole effort is to show, contrary to Kant, that the dispute cannot be resolved; more specifically he reads Kant's *Widerstreit* between the faculties as pulling the supposed subject apart (leaving behind only the "faculty" of judgment as a kind of free-floating, more accurately vacillating, fact of passage or equal attention – think here of Lyotard's reading of Freud). Lyotard reads Kant against Kant, so to speak;<sup>500</sup> he emphasizes the threat that Kant's analytic of the sublime poses to the unity of the Kantian subject:

...the grasp in "one glance" of what is successive, which reason demands of the imagination in the judgment upon the sublime, and which must render intuitable the "coexistence" (*Zugleichsein*) of what can only be given successively, does "violence" not only to the *a priori* condition of the intuition of any given or succession, but to the eminent and unique condition that such a grasp imposes on the "intuition of ourselves and our state". If the imagination were able to satisfy reason, time as the form of inner sense would be altered, at least for the duration of the *Zugleich* (but then how would this be determined?). This would mean that there would no longer be an inner sense to organize our representations in a time series. The "subject" would be

<sup>499</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.103 [114].

<sup>500</sup> Lyotard's most sustained engagement in "reading Kant against Kant" is his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime: Kant's 'Critique of Judgment,' §§ 23-29*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2004. The articles on Kant in *The Inhuman* are also crucial.

deprived of the means of constituting its subjectivity ... the “regression” of the imagination in sublime feeling strikes a blow at the very foundation of the “subject”.<sup>501</sup>

Broken down, the problem is with the demands reason makes of the imagination in the sublime sentiment. The demand for simultaneous presentation of what can only be “given” as successive flies in the face of one of the transcendental conditions of the subject’s experience of the world and itself; it also implies that the subject is internally, necessarily and violently divided.<sup>502</sup> This would render Kant’s faculty notion of the subject a kind of illusion, or at the very least a tenuous truce between warring faculties; the ground of Kant’s subject would on this reading be at best a necessarily and perpetually shifting one.

Like Wittgenstein, then, Kant engages in “the free examination of phrases” and “the (critical) dissociation of their regimens”; specifically, in Kant’s case, as “the separation of the faculties and their conflict”.<sup>503</sup> But like Wittgenstein, Kant does not go far enough. He is not postmodern, but rather an epilogue to modernity or a prologue to an honourable postmodernity: although on the right track, his thought remains beholden to a “cumbersome” transcendental anthropomorphism, failing to take a rupture in subjectivity which he discovers, in the form of the analytic of the sublime, to the very end.<sup>504</sup> Nonetheless, despite complaining that Kant ends by encouraging the “repression of presentation by representation”,<sup>505</sup> Lyotard will draw heavily from him in his remaining years, especially as regards the analytic of the sublime.

Having demonstrated how Lyotard claims Wittgenstein and Kant as his philosophical forerunners while dissociating himself from their residual anthropocentrism, it is time to summarize this section. Assuming that the subject is presented along with, which is to say as an element of, a phrase universe, and that even if transcendent, it is so only by virtue of being marked as such in the universe in which it occurs, we have a philosophical grounding for Lyotard’s phrase-based antihumanism.

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<sup>501</sup> Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, p.143-144 [176-177].

<sup>502</sup> “The sublime is the child of an unhappy encounter, that of the Idea with form. Unhappy because this Idea is unable to make concessions. The law (the father) is so authoritarian, so unconditional ... He desperately needs an imagination that is violated, exceeded, exhausted. She will die in giving birth to the sublime. She will think she is dying.” (Ibid., p.180 [218-219].

<sup>503</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.xiii [12].

<sup>504</sup> Ibid.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid., p.65 [101].

Insofar as Being is *Ereignis*, the “there is / it gives” of phrase universes presented by phrase-events, it does not privilege the human. This is the case even where the human holds a position of transcendence; transcendence is relative to, or a function of, the phrase universe in which it occurs, which makes the human not an ontologically basic organizing concept or principle, but rather an effect of the event, of singularity as an ontological basic. Similar in this sense to the libidinal philosophy, Lyotard’s “philosophy of phrases” at best admits that human beings can be “transcendent” instances in a circumscribed, secondary sense. Even when they are transcendent instances, they are, in a manner of speaking, transcended instances.

## 2.2– A satisfying ethics?

We have seen how the pagan/postmodern phase of Lyotard’s thought culminates in a phrase-based antihumanism. The question is now whether the latter is ethically satisfying in a way that the libidinal antihumanism was not.

The central ethical, political and meta-juridical category of Lyotard’s postmodern “philosophy of phrases” is the *differend*. In *Lyotard: la partie civile*, Gérald Sfez offers a contemporary reading of this key concept. He notes that Lyotard’s appropriation of legalistic terminology (“le dommage, le tort, le litige, le différend, le plaignant, le tribunal, le témoin, la preuve”),<sup>506</sup> is a rigorous if creative one: he redefines them with a view to giving them a new accent and elaborating the conditions of their proper use.<sup>507</sup> As regards the notion of the differend in particular, Lyotard strips the term of its existing meanings and synonyms, isolating/creating a very particular meaning that is philosophical or meta-juridical rather than properly juridical.<sup>508</sup> I will presently explain what this means.

Broadly construed, a differend in Lyotard’s special sense occurs when two or more parties “ne parlent pas du tout le même langage et ne partagent même pas [un] minimum de sol commun qu’un tiers serait capable d’exploiter pour que chacune des parties fasse l’effort de se mettre à la place de l’autre” [“do not speak the same language at all and do not share even a minimum of common ground which a third party would be

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<sup>506</sup> Sfez, *Lyotard: la partie civile*, Paris, Éditions Michalon, 2007, p.6.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid., p.7.

able to exploit in order to ensure that each party makes the effort to put herself in the place of the other.”].<sup>509</sup> Where there is a differend, the problem is that the parties in question do not share “une raison commune” (“a common reason/rationale”); it is as though there were no “language in general” upon which or with which they could meet in order to resolve their conflict.<sup>510</sup> Rather, the parties speak radically heterogeneous languages.<sup>511</sup> As such, any instance of translation from one language to the other would amount to staying within one’s own language at the expense of the other’s singularity; therefore translation would immediately be a form of betrayal.<sup>512</sup> Where there is a differend, Sfez summarizes, “il n’y aurait aucun moyen d’aller vers l’autre sans le ramener à soi-même.” [“there will be no means of going to meet the other without bringing her to oneself.”].<sup>513</sup> In the essentials, this is continuous with the untranslatability of language games as posited in Lyotard’s pagan phase.

Sfez notes that Lyotard appears to offer important variations on this general definition. The first, he claims, can be seen when Lyotard states the following: “As distinguished from a litigation, a differend would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy.”<sup>514</sup> Indeed, since the parties in question do not share the same idiom, both of them might conceivably be in the right, despite being in conflict.<sup>515</sup> Lyotard goes on to say that “applying a single rule of judgment to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits this rule)”.<sup>516</sup> It is a question here of incompatible, nay impossible

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<sup>509</sup> Sfez, *Lyotard: la partie civile*, p.12.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> Ibid. In his *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics*, p.218, Bill Readings gives an excellent example of a differend: in the film *Where the Green Ants Dream* by Werner Herzog, a legal dispute erupts between a mining company and a group of Australian aborigines. The aborigines claim that the miners are digging in sacred ground, and should cease immediately. The court asks the aborigines to produce evidence that the ground in question is sacred; but this would mean violating the taboo on the ground by e.g. digging up sacred artefacts. Basically the aborigines are asked to dig in the ground to substantiate their claim that digging there is out of the question.

<sup>512</sup> Sfez, *Lyotard: La Partie Civile*, p.12.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>514</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.xi [9].

<sup>515</sup> Sfez, *Lyotard: la partie civile*, p.16. Consider the case where the poet and the physicist describe the red of a rose in terms proper to their respective disciplines. Is it meaningful to ask who among them is right?

<sup>516</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.xi [9].

standards of truth, beauty or justice, and how to judge over their conflict without wronging one or both of them by doing so from a perspective which translates them (i.e. treats or puts them in terms of an alien idiom).<sup>517</sup>

With this in mind, it can be seen that in Chapter 1.1 we have already encountered a differend: that between cognitive discourse on the one hand, and Lyotard's methodological materialism on the other. Recall that when judged against the rational-cognitive, Lyotard's methodological evocation of the singular appeared to be pragmatically incoherent.<sup>518</sup> But recall further that when judged against his methodological materialism, rational-cognitive language appeared to be impoverished and narrow with respect to the richness and singularity of the material at hand. As I argued in that section, in the end each side begs the question against the other. Since each position by definition excludes the validity of the other, this is an instance of two radically heterogeneous languages in conflict, and hence, an instance of a differend. The question, as Sfez points out, is how and whether it is possible to judge their dispute without doing injustice to one or both of them.

The second variation of Lyotard's general definition of the differend, Sfez claims, emphasizes the notion of victimhood:<sup>519</sup> "I would like to call a *differend* ... the case where the plaintiff is divested of the means to argue and becomes for that reason a victim."<sup>520</sup> Here, as Sfez points out, the notion that there are two heterogeneous legitimacies in conflict is downplayed; victimhood and differend seem interchangeable, as the latter implies that a radical wrong has been done.<sup>521</sup> Injustice *par excellence* would be a case of a wrong that cannot be presented.<sup>522</sup> But Sfez notes that while the first definition seems to imply the latter, the latter does not imply the former.<sup>523</sup> This puts Lyotard's thinking of the differend in a dynamic tension which Sfez judges to be

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<sup>517</sup> Sfez, *Lyotard: la partie civile*, p.16.

<sup>518</sup> The argument ran roughly as follows: the methodological priority Lyotard accords the singular suggests either that he is making a universal judgment with respect to methodology – which would mean that he is privileging the singular by way of the universal, committing a performative contradiction – or, that he is making arbitrary claims and advancing them as truth claims. In neither case does his methodology recommend itself.

<sup>519</sup> Sfez, *Lyotard: La Partie Civile*, p.22.

<sup>520</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.12, p.9 [24].

<sup>521</sup> Sfez, *Lyotard: La Partie Civile*, p.22-23.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23-24.

<sup>523</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

fruitful.<sup>524</sup> In any case, if the differend implies the victim, then it is not simply a formal-legalistic notion, but one that by definition raises ethical questions.

A third variation<sup>525</sup> on the definition of the differend is as follows: “The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be. This state includes silence, which is a negative phrase, but it also calls upon phrases which are in principle possible. This state is signaled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling: ‘One cannot find the words’, etc.”<sup>526</sup> Sfez emphasizes that “Le sentiment annonce et prescrit” [“The feeling announces and prescribes”].<sup>527</sup> What is meant here is that the feeling attendant to the differend, aside from its enunciatory power as phrase-event, calls upon the addressee of the phrase to respond in a particular way: to find an idiom capable of phrasing that which the feeling signals, or at the very least, capable of phrasing that there is something which cannot (yet) be phrased.<sup>528</sup>

Note that the third definition, besides putting ethico-political questions firmly on the agenda, also posits the basis of such questions and the possibility of responding to them as tied in some way to Lyotard’s phrase-based ontology. I agree with Sfez when he emphasizes that Lyotard’s meditations on the differend are at the heart of a “general ontology”.<sup>529</sup> Reading as I do the differend as an eminently ethico-political concept, the question is: how, then, does Lyotard’s postmodern ontology, his philosophy of phrases, link up to the demands of the ethical? It is here that we must examine his relationship to Emmanuel Levinas.

Lyotard’s debt to Levinas is best summed up as follows: he finds in Levinas a philosopher who links the question of ethics to the *il y a*, the event, in fact who attempts to make ethics a function or category of the event. More generally, Lyotard finds in Levinas a kindred spirit, a philosopher of the event who is radically critical of the pretensions to, and nostalgia for, totality that is characteristic of much of Western thought.<sup>530</sup> Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* bears this out by setting totality against “infinity”: that with which we are never and should never be finished (think here of the

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<sup>524</sup> Sfez, *Lyotard: La Partie Civile*, p.25-26.

<sup>525</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30.

<sup>526</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par. 22, p.13 [29].

<sup>527</sup> Sfez, *Lyotard: La Partie Civile*, p.31.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*, p.31. Recall here also the sublime sentiment, discussed earlier.

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>530</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p.75-76.

Kantian Idea, interminable Freudian analysis, the Lyotardian methodological-materialist gesture...).

It is often objected – and this was Levinas’s main objection to Heidegger – that ontology as first philosophy leaves in suspense or, worse, actively covers over the question of ethics and politics.<sup>531</sup> In fact, like Lyotard, Levinas sees a link between totality, as a philosophical idea or operation, and totalitarianism in the political sense of the term.<sup>532</sup> This informs his defence of the infinite: there are, according to Levinas, certain things that are “non-synthesizable” into any transcendent structure, exemplary among them the “relationship between men”.<sup>533</sup> It is important to note that when he speaks of the “relationship between men”, it is not in the normative or “applied” ethical terms familiar to contemporary North American students of philosophy. Rather, for Levinas, ethics is a matter of the event, cast specifically in terms of the encounter. He conceives of an ethics of the event, then, as first philosophy,<sup>534</sup> in response to Heidegger; what is primary is not the question of Being, but the asymmetrical<sup>535</sup> I/you that is the encounter with the face of the other (asymmetrical because the eruption of the other makes the subject a “you”, renders her subject-to-another, decentres her with respect to her own world, so that she must respond).

The affinity of Lyotard for Levinas can be demonstrated more specifically. For instance, Lyotard’s reading of Heidegger is essentially that of Levinas. As the latter states, “With Heidegger, ‘verbality’ was awakened in the word being, *what is event in it*, the ‘happening’ of being ... Philosophy would thus have been – even when it was not aware of it – an attempt to answer the question of the signification of being, as verb”.<sup>536</sup> Levinas likewise privileges the phrase-event in essentially Lyotardian terms: “for me, the *said [le dit]* does not count as much as the *saying [le dire]* itself. The latter is important to me less through its informational contents than by the fact that it is addressed to an interlocutor”.<sup>537</sup> This is put in more general terms by Levinas as the *il y a* (the “there is”).

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<sup>531</sup> Note that recent Spinozistic attempts to *ground* politics in ontology, such as that of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, seem to have also produced their share of negative assessments.

<sup>532</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p.78-79.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid., p.77.

<sup>535</sup> Ibid., p.98.

<sup>536</sup> Ibid., p.38. Italics mine.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid., p.42.

Just as we saw above, Lyotard peels back the layers of Kant's *Darestellung*, matter given to and synthesized by a subject, to reveal a brute presentation which "gives itself" to no one, Levinas insists "on the impersonality of the 'there is'".<sup>538</sup> But Levinas holds on to the idea that there is a "solution" to the *il y a*,<sup>539</sup> that is, it issues in an ethical relation between human subjects. On this count, note that for him the face is constitutive of the ethical encounter and its being-as-language: "Face and discourse are tied."<sup>540</sup> For Levinas, then, there is if not a humanism in ethics,<sup>541</sup> a privileging of the human as two poles of the ethical relation.

Lyotard stands in an interesting relationship to Levinas because he derives his ethical and political position from a "general ontology", but one which casts the universe as, properly speaking, a multiplicity of universes which are functions of events. Ethics and ontology are not exactly collapsed for the postmodern Lyotard, but he does link ontology to ethics by claiming that the multiplicity of pragmatic universes that constitutes the world admits (in cases where the addressee is situated) of a variably distributed "you", an addressee that is called upon to hear. Hearing, by its structure, is intrinsically asymmetrical: one is seized, taken hostage, to the extent that in hearing one becomes a "you".<sup>542</sup> But for Lyotard, it is not that some *prior* you becomes a "you"; he retains what Levinas identifies as the asymmetry constitutive of the event of the encounter with the face of the other, but he denies that the event comes to you (or that it must come from the face). Rather, since you are, as such, only when situated in a phrase universe, "You come when it arrives",<sup>543</sup> and for reasons we have seen, you must always respond.

The "you" who comes, comes into being with the phrase-event, but this is not enough to say that the you is obliged. Lyotard is careful to note that "*It is necessary to link is not You ought to link*"; that is, "one is not held by an occurrence the same way one is held by an obligation".<sup>544</sup> One is obliged only at the level of genres of discourse, which is to say that obligation pertains to rules of linkage and is hypothetical in its structure:

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<sup>538</sup> Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, p.48.

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, p.87.

<sup>541</sup> See Levinas, "Humanisme et anarchie", *Revue internationale de philosophie* no. 22, 1968, pp. 323-337.

<sup>542</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.111[164-165].

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, par.173, p.116. [171].

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, par.174, p.116 [171].

“you ought to link on like this in order to get to that”.<sup>545</sup> He speculates, however, as to whether there is an ethical genre: if there is one, he questions whether or not it would be “the one whose rule is to admit no rule but that of obligation without conditions”.<sup>546</sup> This would make ethics “akin to the philosophical genre”, i.e. the genre whose stakes are to find the rules by which to proceed.<sup>547</sup> It would be a matter of responding without rule to the eruption of the I/you relation (in Lyotard’s terms, the addressor/addressee relation). In this special sense, ontology is intimately tied to ethics: while the event does not exactly imply the ethical genre, the ethical genre implies the event. To speak of the ethical is to speak of a bearing-witness and an obligation to the event.

There are, it seems, two parts to the ethical dimension of Lyotard’s postmodern philosophy of phrases. On the one hand, he develops the normative claims of the pagan period promoting respect of singularity, experimentation, dispersion and dissensus by formulating the notion of the differend. On the other hand, he suggests that the ethical, to the extent that this is a genre of discourse, implies and is intimately linked to his ontology. Phrasing entails not only the differend, but the necessity, to the extent that one is constituted as an addressee in the umbrella of the ethical genre, to respond to it.

The question may be fairly posed, however: in what sense, if any, is the ethical genre determinant in the last instance? The philosophy of the differend circles the problem of the rupture, victimhood and silence attendant to discourse. Does it, however, convincingly show that we must respond ethically, or with ethics in mind, to the differend? Perhaps ethics as genre shows this itself, as Lyotard seems to suggest. But then does not the ethical genre itself stand in a relation of differend to any and all other genres which would claim that the stakes of discourse are to conquer, to colonize, and so forth? By speculating as to the genre status of ethics, Lyotard opens the door to the claim that ethics is one genre among others holding no pre-eminent place; or, by contrast, that ethics is a kind of meta-genre and therefore one which, paradoxically, commits wrongs. The basic normative problem of the pagan phase abides in the more refined postmodern phase.

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<sup>545</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.174, p.116 [171].

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*, par.175, p.117 [172]. Think back to Lyotard’s contortions with respect to prescription, reflective judgment, and Idea in *Au juste*.

<sup>547</sup> *Ibid.*

It may be further asked what all of this entails, if anything, in terms of a positive ethics or politics. We are called by (and into being by) differends where they occur, and, in light of the ethical genre, this implies an obligation with respect to finding an idiom that does not do violence to one or both parties – perhaps an impossible task, or at least a task with no guarantees, and certainly admitting of little or nothing to guide us. As Lyotard says of the event, “you can’t make a political ‘program’ with it, but you can bear witness to it”.<sup>548</sup> At best we bear witness to the differend, to the fact that something which cannot be put into language is trying to speak. An extreme respect for the heterogeneous is entailed by all this, but beyond that it is difficult to see what has become of politics. Whereas the libidinal phase admitted of “conspirators”, the philosophy of the differend seems much more cautious. To the extent that he increasingly emphasizes vigilance and respect for difference, Lyotard ultimately abandons the revolutionary and even the insurrectionary aims of his earlier phases.<sup>549</sup>

Beyond seeming formally negative, “*attentiste*”, Lyotard’s philosophy of the differend seems to imply other difficulties. The rigour characteristic of the ethics laid out in *Le différend* seems to extend in a pernicious way to applied problems broached in the text. For one thing, with respect to the silences of Holocaust survivors, treated briefly above, Lyotard’s position flirts with the negationism it ostensibly opposes – that is, it risks a position that is unduly strict about what constitutes or determines the reality of a given referent. As indicated already, it may be questioned whether removing the four “situated” silences which can occur there is not too high a standard, notwithstanding the possibility of logical retreat or concession discussed in the Gorgias notice.

In sum, the postmodern philosophy of phrases apparently generates a rigorous exploration of language pragmatics as ontology; it is less clear, however, that it dissolves the problem of the grounding of ethics. In any case it is my belief that Lyotard’s strategy, if not the stakes of his project, change after *Le différend*. While still operating within the purview of the philosophy of the differend, he appears to shift from a formal, language-

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<sup>548</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.264, p.181 [260].

<sup>549</sup> Georges Van Den Abbeele claims that it is Lyotard’s book on Kant’s historico-political writings, *L’enthousiasme*, in which the political implications of *Le différend* are brought to fruition. For Van Den Abbeele, the book “marks the full transition from Lyotard’s earlier Freudo-Marxist preoccupation with libidinal politics and cultural revolution to his latter work on more discursive models of social justice and ethics” (Van Den Abbeele in Lyotard, *Enthusiasm*, p.ix).

pragmatic description of the material at hand and the claims of ethics towards something resembling an antihumanist philosophical anthropology – what I will prefer to call a “paralogy of the human”, an “anthro-paralogy”. More specifically, it appears that, having arrived at the impasse of a radical linguistic/ontological dispersion and the difficulty of articulating without paradox how one can be said to have ethical duties within and because of such a dispersion, Lyotard begins to multiply testimonies to the effect that the individual human being and perhaps the human as such, if there is such, is constitutively resistant to totalizing genres. This strategic turn will be the subject of the next chapter.

### Chapter 3:

#### Late Writings: An Anthro-paralogy of Resistance

...each so-called individual is divisible and plausibly divided into a number of partners ...

- Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*

It's not I who choose; it's something in me that resists.

- André Malraux, *The Royal Way*

Anti-essentialists are ... wary of the idea of nature, just as the apologists of capitalism are. Capitalism wants men and women to be infinitely pliable and adaptable. As a system, it has a Faustian horror of fixed boundaries, of anything which offers an obstacle to the infinite accumulation of capital. If it is a thoroughly materialist system in one sense, it is a virulently anti-material one in another. Materiality is what gets in its way. It is the inert, recalcitrant stuff which puts up resistance to its grandiose schemes. Everything solid must be dissolved into air.

- Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*

As argued in the previous chapter, Lyotard's postmodern philosophy of phrases constitutes an antihumanism attuned to, moreover primarily concerned with, questions of ethics and justice. The pagan/postmodern writings which culminate in *Le différend* do not, however, provide an ultimate ground of ethics. This is only consistent with Lyotard's methodological materialism, which (paradoxically, as we saw) is a barrier in principle to systematic, ultimate accounts. The pagan/postmodern writings sketch a formal account of justice and injustice – as well as providing more concrete descriptions of a plurality of justices and injustices – which, however compelling, ultimately begs the question for methodological reasons. Against Habermas and Apel, who sought penultimate and ultimate grounds for consensus, respectively, Lyotard vigorously defends difference, dispersion and dissensus. For aforementioned rational/cognitive reasons, however, it remains unclear how he can perform the defence of these consistently.

The tension flagged here also characterizes Lyotard's later writings, by which I designate those written in the period between *Le différend* and his death in 1998. The tension will not, however, take pride of place in my analysis. The first sub-section explains why, in providing an account of the overall logic of the later writings. Specifically, I interpret Lyotard as employing a particular “anthro-paralogical” strategy in

lieu of answering head-on the lingering methodological doubts surrounding the philosophy of *Le différend*. The subsequent three sub-sections will plot out some of his later ideas and arguments in light of my claim that they can be said to fall under the dictates of this strategy. The final sub-section will indicate Lyotard's own reservations about the strategy in question: specifically, where he questions the extent to which its products may be recuperated and employed by the system against which they are offered as resistance. This brief exploration of Lyotard's doubts will set the stage for the more sustained critical engagement of Chapter 4.

Concerning choice of texts, I will again loosely follow the chronological development of Lyotard's ideas, beginning with his immediate post-*Différend* texts and ending with his posthumously published study of Augustine. In particular I will focus on *Heidegger et "les juifs"*, *L'inhumain*, *Misère de la philosophie*, both books on Malraux, and *La confession d'Augustin*. My reasoning is that these texts capture nicely the main subject matters and themes – namely those political-strategic matters I will call “anthro-paralogical” – which concern Lyotard later in life. The choice and order of texts could be, however, fairly loose in theory. It is my belief that there is less development, strictly speaking, in the later Lyotard than there is accumulation of evidence; there is also, however, experimentation and variation on the themes which run from the libidinal through to the postmodern works. Lyotard left us in any case with an engaging body of late work which we must link on to; the question is of course how, but I leave this to my final chapter.

### **3.1 – A Strategic Shift**

It is not accurate to say that Lyotard's post-*Différend* writings make a systematic effort to respond to the demand for an ultimate ground of ethics. This is, apparently, as it should be. Since he continues to privilege the event, his claims pertaining to justice must be evaluated accordingly, i.e. in light of his methodological materialism – and the latter (paradoxically, as we saw) disqualifies him from making claims with certainty and/or from making determinant judgments with respect to claims falling under other phrase regimens and/or genres. Ultimately, those wishing for an account of ethics from Lyotard which does not beg the question will still not be satisfied. As suggested previously,

however, it appears that he is well aware of this problem. In the later writings his *strategy* shifts to an appreciable extent, and to me this is what is of greatest interest. The present sub-section describes and lays the groundwork for an evaluation of this shift.

First I will need to explain my choice of wording. In speaking of a strategic shift I am indicating that Lyotard should not be viewed as a “pure”, disinterested theorist/researcher – as if anyone could be! – but rather a philosopher for whom politics and, to an arguable extent, the political as such, are always at issue.<sup>550</sup> Briefly touching upon the latter point, I agree with Williams<sup>551</sup> when he reads Lyotard as having been a *philosopher of the political* to the end of his days. Even when the very notion of the political took on strange and in some cases unrecognizable shapes at various stages of his life’s work, Lyotard’s philosophy was always one speaking to the very nature, conditions and possibility of politics. An example of this kind of engagement may be found in the section “Le genre, la norme” in *Le différend*, where Lyotard conceives of the political in the terms of his philosophy of phrases.

However interesting, I will not pursue further the question of Lyotard as philosopher of the political. What is of greater interest to me is the series comprising Lyotard the Left-Marxist revolutionary, the libidinal economist, witness to the differend, the sublime, and, as we will see in this chapter, the always already forgotten, the inhuman, the promise and abjection of infancy, etc.<sup>552</sup> It is my view that in the later works Lyotard remained not simply a philosopher of the political, but also a *politically engaged philosopher*, one who lived and struggled with that eminently practical question, “what is to be done?”. Granted, if he was a politically engaged philosopher, then in later days he certainly cut a strange and lonely figure as one. He operated in a highly idiosyncratic manner, often choosing what appear to be bizarre or counter-intuitive concerns and targets. To read the later Lyotard as a politically engaged philosopher is in any case to believe that something of the order of practical politics was at stake in his writings. In my view it is quite plausible to assume, in other words, that he formulated

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<sup>550</sup> My distinction here is an admittedly loose one. I mean something like Lefort’s distinction between “*le politique*” and “*la politique*”, roughly the difference between “the political as such” and “politics”, where the former is the condition/background of the latter. See Bourq’s commentary in Lefort, *Complications: Communism and the Dilemmas of Democracy*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007, p.14-16.

<sup>551</sup> See Williams, *Lyotard and the Political*, London and New York, Routledge, 2000.

<sup>552</sup> Williams’s aforementioned text is also a good if frenetically paced resource for an overview of Lyotard’s different political phases.

various paths to particular political goals, deploying various means for the purpose of achieving them. This means that even in his seemingly most apolitical and esoteric writings, it is possible to speak of Lyotard following a strategy or strategies, and employing a tactic or tactics.

I argue that one such strategy-tactic couplet emerges fairly clearly in the later writings. As Williams rightly points out,<sup>553</sup> Lyotard employs a strategy of undermining Ideas of reason<sup>554</sup> such as humanity and technoscientific progress,<sup>555</sup> and uses to this end a variety of ironical stylistic tactics:<sup>556</sup>

The Idea is usually something quite complex and sophisticated, such as ‘We are brought together today by the human task of making sense of technology’. But this strong and convincing line of argument, based around a shared sense of what is occurring to us and why, is almost imperceptibly undermined by other suggestions. The operation of this suggestion takes many forms, and this explains the variety of styles [in the later works]. Each time, though, uncertainty and doubt are introduced and often in a very short space or according to a variation in delivery. The problem for the reader is that this doubt grows on closer inspection: what can appear, at first, to be an incidental remark or lapse of style is, in fact, intricately woven into what appeared to be most familiar and clear-cut.<sup>557</sup>

Lyotard’s aim, then, is to “instil a disabling feeling around Ideas of reason”, through ironical stylistic tactics, “as a means to a politics of resistance in actual cases”.<sup>558</sup> Restricting my focus to the Idea of humanity, however, it must be said that in troubling this Idea Lyotard deploys tactics that are not simply stylistic in nature: he also appears to make tentative, tenuous claims about the human as such. These are admittedly of a formally negative cast (i.e. to the effect that the human as such, if there is such, inherently

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<sup>553</sup> Williams, *Lyotard and the Political*, p.122-26.

<sup>554</sup> Here is Williams’s take on the Idea of reason, which we already encountered in the previous chapter: “The Kantian definition of an Idea of reason is that it is an idea, derived from a concept of the understanding, for which it is impossible to present an intuition. Thus, from the concept ‘human’, we derive an idea of humanity though we cannot offer an intuition for that Idea. In the formulation of Ideas of reason, we start with a concept and, quite legitimately and necessarily, given the demand for completion in reason, logically expand it by moving, for example, from great to greatest or from part to whole. Though it is a requirement for the concept to be in conformity with an intuition, this cannot be the case for the idea, given a limitation on the faculty of imagination; it is not capable of representing the greatest size or the whole of humanity.” (Ibid., p.114-115.)

<sup>555</sup> A good example is the essay “A Postmodern Fable” in *Postmodern Fables*. By constructing a fable about the death of the sun, Lyotard suggests, without clearly stating, that both Humanity and Progress are dead in the water (p.101 [94]: “...this fable asks not that it be believed, only that we reflect on it.”).

<sup>556</sup> For example: using two voices, “He” and “She” in the article “Can Thought go on without a Body?” (in *The Inhuman*) Lyotard “genders” and thereby undermines simple talk of humanity as such.

<sup>557</sup> Williams, *Lyotard and the Political*, p.124.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid., p.122.

*resists* certain processes, or that it is inherently incomplete / at odds with itself). This appears, on first blush, to be paradoxical: it amounts to appealing to the human as such, if there is such, in order to “instil a disabling feeling” around the Idea of the human as such. One wonders whether Lyotard is in plain contradiction here, or whether he is appealing to one Idea over and against another. I suggest that the latter is the more plausible option. It is not the Idea of the human as such that Lyotard finds troubling, it would appear; rather, it is the Idea of the human as something to be fulfilled or accomplished (as per nihilating-religious grand narratives of emancipation, such as the Soviet humanist grand narrative). Recall his claim in *Au juste* about the Idea of justice: that “in contradistinction to what Kant thought, this Idea is not for us today, an Idea of totality”.<sup>559</sup> Similarly, it is highly plausible to read Lyotard’s later invocations of the human as such – for instance, when he claims that “the child whose playmates say they will no longer play with him/her and refuse to talk about it is in truth the victim of a crime against humanity”<sup>560</sup> – as invocations of an Idea of human dispersion, difference, and openness.

One wonders, however, if one can with consistency have the Idea of the human on the agenda in this way while simultaneously claiming to be an antihumanist. If Sfez is right, the later Lyotard’s notion of the “good”, plastic, inner inhuman, which will be explored below, preserves the Idea of humanity – specifically, the one which Lyotard holds open, an idea of constitutive openness – against the inhumanity of the technoscientific system which threatens it.<sup>561</sup> But this means that the method of irony and stylistic heterogeneity which subtly undoes the Idea of humanity as totality also serves, perhaps in spite of itself, to mask another speaking in humanity’s name. It might appear as if Lyotard’s strategy in the later works nourishes a kind of crypto-humanism; that is, a coded humanism masked by lip-service to antihumanism. Scattered philosophical claims about the human are indeed offered against the techno-scientific system which threatens it; as Paul Harris rightly points out, “Lyotard is pleading for a reassertion of the human mind in its contingency and finitude”.<sup>562</sup> This is perhaps all that is needed to catch

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<sup>559</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p.88 [183].

<sup>560</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.210 [179].

<sup>561</sup> Sfez, *Lyotard: La Partie Civile*, p.116.

<sup>562</sup> Harris, “Thinking @ the Speed of Time: Globalization and its Dis-contents or, Can Lyotard’s Thought Go on without a body?”, in Harvey and Schehr (eds.), *Yale French Studies Number 99: Jean-François Lyotard: Time and Judgment*. New Haven, Connecticut, Yale University Press, 2001, p.148.

Liotard in a humanist trap. Stuart Sim, for instance, argues that “[t]he threat of inhumanism [‘a deliberate blurring of the lines between human beings and machines, going well past the point of current medical procedures’]<sup>563</sup> taxed Lyotard quite considerably, to the point where we might even see the glimmerings of a new form of humanism in his later writings”.<sup>564</sup> Sim is quick to point out that the latter “humanism” has little in common with the “old” humanisms and is, as opposed to them, formally negative/resistant,<sup>565</sup> nonetheless, on his reading the defence of the human as such, as Lyotard conceives it, amounts to a form of humanism.

I would suggest however that things are more nuanced than this. It is too simplistic and in any case misleading to ascribe “humanism”, coded or otherwise, to the later Lyotard – unless, perhaps, we empty the term “humanism” of its specificity, and view it as any position sticking up for human beings. Lyotard’s later position is not a form of “humanism” if by this we mean that the human being is the conceptual/ethical centre or orienting principle of his position. For one thing, as already noted the “essence” of the human Lyotard sketches in his later writings is more like a dissonance; it is a floating, aleatory anti-essence that is found at work in particular humans, undermining the nihilating-transcendent claims of “the Human” – be the latter a robust, “filled in” concept or an Idea conceived as a project to be fulfilled. This essentially brings Lyotard full circle to the uneasy position he occupied in his early phenomenological-Marxist phase, where the human was characterized as the site of a permanent questioning and struggle over the establishment of meaning and history. For the earlier as well as for the later Lyotard, the human is neither a fixed essence, nor a project achievable / to be achieved once and for all. To return to Harris’s claim, it is the human mind “*in its contingency and finitude*”<sup>566</sup> that Lyotard champions.

It would therefore be more accurate to say that for the later as well as for the early Lyotard, the Idea of humanity is still operative, but, precisely, at the expense of a nihilating-transcendent, determinate vision of humanity, as either essence or project – that is, the Idea remains open and is one of dispersion. As such, it is operative at the

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<sup>563</sup> Sim, *Lyotard and the Inhuman*, Cambridge UK, Icon Books UK and Totem Books USA, 2001, p.15.

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25.

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>566</sup> Harris, “Thinking @ the Speed of Time: Globalization and its Dis-contents or, Can Lyotard’s Thought Go on without a body?”, p.148. Italics mine.

expense of humanism. Recall that in Kant's terms an Idea is not a Concept of the understanding. Lyotard's strategy, to the extent that it resuscitates or keeps open the question of the Idea of humanity, is therefore of the order of reflective rather than determinate judgment. This is why it can be claimed that his method remains materialist in the later works, rather than nihilating-religious, even where the human as such, if there is such, is at issue. He presents indirect evidence that a heterogeneous "core" is constitutive of the human as such, if anything is; essentially, his postmodern critique of the subject is given some degree of substance in the later works through additive testimony, but is not ultimately substantiated. He does not try to develop a positive, nihilating-religious account of some essentially fixed or achievable humanity, but rather, accumulates evidence that what is called "human" is inherently troubled and recalcitrant to nihilation/totalization. The analysis is a partial, inherently incomplete patchwork account of the resistant "inhuman" which inhabits and haunts the human, conceived as essence or project. The later Lyotard multiplies testimonies *to the effect* that the human as such, if there is such, resists post-political administration/rationalization (and for that matter, humanist discourse); since he employs reflective judgment and remains methodologically materialist he does not and cannot, however, make the claim that this is certainly so.

As mentioned earlier, throughout this chapter I will designate this strategy of Lyotard's "anthro-paralogical". Some commentary on this shorthand is necessary, since to my knowledge it is a novel designation of Lyotard's later strategy. If the later works instil a disabling feeling around the Idea of humanity (as totality), then in doing so they also sketch (but do not systematically formulate) something of an open-ended philosophical counter-analysis of the human as such, if there is such. But the appearance of determinate if negative judgments about the human as such, if there is such, is the effect of an analysis which aims at sites where the human breaks down, for what are arguably intrinsic/internal reasons. Such an analysis aims at a "paralogy" of the human. "Paralogy", in the sense used in *La condition postmoderne*, can be summed up as "producing not the known, but the unknown":<sup>567</sup> looked at in different terms, working the

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<sup>567</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.60 [97].

existing rules of language games to the point where new games may emerge.<sup>568</sup> Postmodern science, that of the “the Human” included, thus becomes a search for instabilities in systems of knowledge.<sup>569</sup> No longer at issue is the construction of internally coherent, comprehensive-totalizing accounts of subject-matters; “anthro-paralogy”, then, as a search for instabilities in “the Human”.

I say “anthro-paralogy” and not “anthropology”. The latter, if taken in the literal sense of a “Logos of Man”, would denote a nihilating-transcendent discourse on the human: “such is the human as such”, or “the human will be such”. The discourse I ascribe to Lyotard, by contrast, would be one which seeks out in “Man”, i.e. “the Human”, that which is untenable, dissonant, over-determined: “the human is always already undermined by such”, or “the human is heterogeneous and hard to pin down based on the following evidence”. The difference between “anthro-paralogy” and “anthropology” is, admittedly, something of a terminological quibble, since contemporary anthropology *as practiced* is not necessarily nihilating-religious.<sup>570</sup> In any case, anthropology as social science is more or less empirical, whereas anthropology as philosophical enterprise is more or less conceptual and universalizing. In making the distinction between “anthropology” and “anthro-paralogy” I wish simply to avoid confusion; ascribing an “anthropological” strategy to Lyotard might create for philological reasons the impression that he is producing a nihilating-religious discourse on the human, and this I believe would be a misunderstanding.

So much, then, for the most general characteristics of Lyotard’s strategy – what does it look like in action? Because it is essentially additive and exploratory, its implementation benefits from the culling of testimonies to the inhuman core of the human from various domains and in various manners (recall on this count Williams’s claim that Lyotard is a strategic “plunderer” of the history of philosophy).<sup>571</sup> Hence the

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<sup>568</sup> Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p.43 [71-72].

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, section 13.

<sup>570</sup> See for instance Margery Wolf, *A Thrice-told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1992. In a very Lyotardian gesture, Wolf presents her ethnographic research in three different versions, each voiced in a different literary genre. She presents raw field notes, an academic article and a short story, refusing to say which is true or to provide an overarching, synthesizing account of them.

<sup>571</sup> Williams, *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*, p.24-25.

appearance of a loosely connected thematic/stylistic “archipelago”<sup>572</sup> among the later works: engagements with Malraux, Kant, Freud and Augustine resonate with each other but exist essentially unsystematized alongside aesthetic studies, essays on media and technology, and so on.

Notwithstanding the heterogeneity in question, the later engagement with Kant, the basics of which were already plotted out in *Le différend*, sums up nicely what is more generally at stake in the later writings and may therefore serve as a useful point of departure for exploring the rest of the archipelago.<sup>573</sup> In fact, Lyotard emphasizes in several places that the metaphor of an archipelago and the passages between it characterize Kant’s account of the subject, more specifically the passage by judgment between the faculties.<sup>574</sup> I have already underscored how in the pagan/postmodern phase Lyotard troubles the latter notion of the subject. He points out that such passages as Kant accepts are of the order of the “as if”; while drawing the very boundaries they cross and thus somewhat sensitive to difference, they are analogies bordering on, risking and perpetrating differends.<sup>575</sup> Moreover, by appealing to Kant’s analytic of the sublime, Lyotard reads Kant against Kant, and suggests that there are cases, the sublime sentiment being exemplary among them, where the passages in question appear to be impossible – judgment, on this view, being not so much a binding agent as an equal, free-floating attention, a power of experimentation ever charged with testing what appear to be uncrossable waters.

Recall that in *Le différend*, Lyotard speaks of Kant’s faculties in terms of phrase regimens and genres, rather than in anthropological terms, i.e. as fixed properties or powers of the supposed subject. While he does not avowedly retreat from this antihumanist approach in the later works, he does seem more sympathetic to the idea that an account of reflective judgment does not rule out sustained thinking about some kind of “minimal soul”<sup>576</sup> that may be cashed out in terms of a methodological-materialist

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<sup>572</sup> See Naas, “Lyotard Archipelago”, in Nouvet, Stahuljak, and Still (eds.), *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, pp. 176-196.

<sup>573</sup> In *ibid.*, Naas makes the case that Lyotard’s late engagement with Malraux is similarly a good point of departure.

<sup>574</sup> See for instance *The Differend*, p.130-133 [189-193].

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*, p.123 [180-181].

<sup>576</sup> Cf. “Anima Minima” in Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*.

account of the body and “passibility”<sup>577</sup> to feeling (or “the affect-phrase”)<sup>578</sup>. The human body, insofar as it is for the postmodern Lyotard something that is phrased/phrases, is not on that count nothing; starting from the most austere antihumanist premises one may still speak of it and examine its dissonant particularities. It appears overall that the human gains greater importance in the later writings, but strictly speaking, as a minimally defined site of phrase-pragmatic contestation rather than as a positively fleshed-out, nihilating-religious principle. The aim, to reiterate, is to accumulate dissonances falling under the proper name “Human”.

Accordingly, Lyotard spends the last ten or so years of his life investigating different theorizations and examples of the impossibility of passage between “faculties”, i.e. regimens and genres, with a view to suggesting that the human as such – *perhaps*, it should be emphasized – is inherently resistant to forced passage. His examples are not always cast in terms of the sublime, though they are frequently compared to it. Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit* and primary sexual difference are important references, as we will see; Malraux’s terms (“stridence”, “throat”, etc) are taken up in two later books; in the posthumous book on Augustine, finally, the impossibility of passage is rendered quite abstractly in terms of *n*-dimensional “cuts”, the Christian notion of grace, and so forth. Such readings sketch a human subject which embodies or constitutes various troubled, seemingly impossible passages; it is a hanging-together which is inherently threatened with coming apart, or which constitutes a state of complication or hauntedness.

This, then, is the basic picture. But is it satisfying? And on what grounds could we say that it is? Consistently employing Lyotard’s later strategy, at best we could say that the human is, perhaps, always already undermined by that which, in or of the human body / “minimal soul”, resists. Lyotard does not appear to construct a nihilating-religious account of the human; rather, he sketches the human as, if anything, something beholden to, i.e. “passible” to, the event. But this means that his final political battle was characterized – significantly hampered, perhaps – by a formal negativity, not to mention a perhaps overly-high level of refinement. As regards the first point, one can question the efficacy of a strategy courting paradox, and in any case, due to its essentially negative

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<sup>577</sup> Lyotard, *Misère de la philosophie*, p.76.

<sup>578</sup> Cf. “La phrase-affect”, in *ibid*.

and additive nature, resembling something of a Hegelian “spurious infinity”.<sup>579</sup> Such a strategy without guarantee is not without its melancholia, as Williams and other interpreters agree: it will appear interminable and/or quixotic. As regards the second, perhaps less crucial but nonetheless important point, subtle literary irony and stylistic heterogeneity deployed in relatively inaccessible texts seem to constitute a poor political tactic. Unless of course one is extremely charitable as regards the scope of “diversity of tactics” or, more to the point, agrees with the later Lyotard that bearing witness through writing (broadly construed) is virtually all that remains of politics.<sup>580</sup>

This last point bears further consideration. Admittedly, what I have described here cuts a strange figure as political engagement. If Lyotard is right, however, the hypothesis of a post-political capitalist/technoscientific system changes the rules of the game. Politics, in the traditional sense of organizing and mobilizing concretely to achieve counterfactual states of social reality, founders alongside its legitimating narratives with the advent of sociological postmodernity. For the later Lyotard, testimony to the resistance of the “inhuman” in fine art, literature, psychoanalysis and, as we will see concerning Malraux and Augustine, autobiographical and “hypobiographical” writing therefore becomes, it would seem, all that remains of politics. Testimony becomes a politically motivated engagement, since politics as such has become a defence of the inhuman plasticity and openness which for Lyotard partly and negatively define the human as such.<sup>581</sup> Politics becomes the bearing-witness to a universal human “core” which is neither human, in the sense usually meant, nor necessarily stable enough to designate the term “core”.

As we will see, especially as regards the writings on Malraux and Augustine, Lyotard’s late strategy was nonetheless, perhaps, not altogether without hope of a positive content to come. Sfez argues that in tactically undermining the Idea so as to ensure that it remained open, Lyotard went to the very edge of nihilism without succumbing to it (in fact, Sfez sees in Lyotard’s thought a courageous antidote to

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<sup>579</sup> Lyotard’s later works owe a sizable debt to Adorno. There is a structural homology between Lyotard’s spurious infinity of testimony and Adorno’s “determinate negations”: each labours interminably without, though for different reasons, the guarantee of the Concept. See especially Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, London and New York, Verso, 2005.

<sup>580</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p. 7 [15].

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*

nihilism).<sup>582</sup> Williams's contrary suspicion that Lyotard's later politics founder, despite their possible positive content, on a formalistic nihilism<sup>583</sup> should be read alongside the interpretation of Lyotard as having sketched the human as, if not the subject of a politics, then an intractable barrier to the smooth administration of post-politics, and, perhaps for that reason, the locus of a radical hope. Perhaps, in short, something can be salvaged from this admittedly melancholic sketch (more on this in my conclusion). For now, let us examine the main details of Lyotard's later engagements.

### 3.2 – Kant, Freud and “the jews”

The publication by Victor Farias of *Heidegger et le nazisme* in 1987 created a major sensation in France. The book documented and brought to wider attention Heidegger's connection to the Nazi party, which had long been something of an open secret among French intellectuals. “L'affaire Heidegger”,<sup>584</sup> as it was known, provoked a storm of responses. Lyotard, who as we saw in Chapter 2.1 was intellectually indebted to Heidegger to an appreciable extent, weighed in with the book *Heidegger et “les juifs”*.

In that text, Lyotard reads Nazism as an outcome of the totalizing, nihilistic-religious logic characteristic of (the dominant strand of) Western thought. It is notable that Nazism was in no way, for Lyotard, the last word on this logic: event-foreclosing totalization continues on as “development”, i.e. the expansive and complexifying logic of technoscience. Nor is Nazism essentially finished: certain of its dreams are now realities, or at least imminent possibilities. For instance, contemporary capitalism and its attendant security culture has in certain respects far outstripped anything Nazism dreamt of in terms of efficiency, social mapping and population control. With respect to its push for total mobilization, at least, Nazism has set the agenda and in this sense has won out in “[w]hat is called modern democracy”.<sup>585</sup> To this extent, Nazism is not reducible to an historical aberration, e.g. a singular personality cult welded to a moment of mass hysteria among Germans, as certain historians would have it.

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<sup>582</sup> Sfez, *Lyotard: La Partie Civile*, p.119.

<sup>583</sup> Williams, *Lyotard and the Political*, p.132.

<sup>584</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p.4 [16].

<sup>585</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.75-76 [87].

This is not to say that Nazism did not exhibit certain particularities.<sup>586</sup> In spite of these, however, it was and is exemplary of the broader totalitarian logic underlying the West,<sup>587</sup> even where the latter is not instantiated as openly genocidal or anti-Semitic; even the emancipatory discourses of Western humanisms, on this reading, share Nazism's underlying event-foreclosing logic.<sup>588</sup> The basic issue is that “L'Occident n'accepte pas les dons” – “The West does not accept gifts”, i.e. does not accept that which lies outside of its control, its purview, its nihilating-religious framework.<sup>589</sup> Though the issue of Western anti-Semitism does not exhaust the matter, it does actually get to its heart. The essence of Western anti-Semitism is, according to Lyotard, not xenophobia, but rather an anxiety with respect to what is always already forgotten in rational, system-building thought: precisely, singularity, the event, that in the material at hand which resists totalization-nihilation.<sup>590</sup>

On this reading, Nazism was a furious acting out, an instantiated West attempting once and for all to cancel its debt to the always already forgotten, the event which is its base material and which therefore, in a manner of speaking, constitutes it while holding it hostage.<sup>591</sup> The concrete form that this attempt took was the elimination of those who bore witness to the always already forgotten: those who attested to the fact that the human spirit is constitutively haunted, wounded and ultimately intractable to totality and grand political projects.<sup>592</sup> Lyotard calls these people “the jews”, lower-case and plural<sup>593</sup>

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<sup>586</sup> Lyotard drives this point home when he claims that “it is simplistic to use one term (totalitarianism) to cover both Nazism and capitalism in its postmodern phase”. (*The Postmodern Explained*, p.72 [107].)

<sup>587</sup> The reader may have noted here that Lyotard is at a methodological disadvantage when making claims about history. On the one hand he could argue that Nazism was an insane and unaccountable event, absolutely singular and therefore resistant to historical explanation. This would accord it a kind of postmodern-ethical respect, but would limit whatever lessons he could derive from it, including those that would shed light on “l'affaire Heidegger”. On the other hand, and this is what he appears to do in the final analysis, Lyotard could link Nazism onto a kind of universal history of the West – i.e. the West as the unfolding of a philosophical logic of nihilistic religiosity. This option is also undesirable, since it violates the spirit of his methodological materialism. Lyotard's claims about history must be taken, in the final analysis and as concerns the issue of their truth, as “apathetic” (in the sense explored above).

<sup>588</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p.27 [52-53].

<sup>589</sup> An excellent account of this shared Western logic can be found in Lyotard, *Misère de la philosophie*, p.121-124.

<sup>590</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p.22-23 [47].

<sup>591</sup> The diffuse “background” of Western thought is that which enables thought, but which thought cannot think as such – much in the way that childhood is the background of adulthood but cannot be entirely assimilated/grasped/worked-through by the adult (*Ibid.*, p.27 [52-53].).

<sup>592</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27 [52].

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3, 22 [13-14, 45].

– actual Jews, certainly, since they are wandering hostages to the inarticulate voice of their God; but also Roma, avant-garde artists, philosophers in Lyotard’s vein, etc. As Lyotard puts it,

...“the jews” are within the “spirit” of the Occident that is so preoccupied with foundational thinking, what resists this spirit; within its will, the will to want, what gets in the way of this will; within its accomplishments, projects, and progress, what never ceases to reopen the wound of the unaccomplished. “The jews” are the irremissible in the West’s movement of remission and pardon. They are what cannot be domesticated in the obsession to dominate, in the compulsion to control domain, in the passion for empire, recurrent ever since Hellenistic Greece and Christian Rome. “The jews,” never at home wherever they are, cannot be integrated, converted, or expelled. They are also always away from home when they are at home, in their so-called own tradition, because it includes exodus as its beginning, excision, impropriety, and respect for the forgotten. They are required more than guided by the cloud of free energy that they desperately try to understand, even to see, storm cloud in the Sinai. They can only assimilate, said Hannah Arendt ... if they also assimilate anti-Semitism.

<sup>594</sup>

The Final Solution betrayed the formidable anxiety and panic of which it was a function in the attempt to erase even the very memory of those “jews” who were eliminated (as evinced by how records of the deportations and exterminations were systematically destroyed).<sup>595</sup> The extent to which this anxiety still characterizes the West is highly troubling. Because it overreached (attacking other event-foreclosing empires such as the Soviet Union), Nazism was “beaten down like a mad dog, by a police action”, but it “has not been refuted”.<sup>596</sup> Its most basic premises, if Lyotard is correct, hide among the premises of contemporary democracy.

Heidegger figures here in an interesting way. Recall that he was concerned primarily with the question of Being and its forgetting in the history of metaphysics. More sensitive than most to questions of memory, the event, and the conditions of thinking, he should have known better than anyone the intellectual and ethical impoverishment of Nazism, or for that matter, of any political project premised on the cancellation of the West’s debt to the material at hand – that is, to the diffuse background conditions of its own thought.<sup>597</sup> Perhaps, unless we are speaking of the “politics” of the

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<sup>594</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p.22 [45-46].

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, p.25 [49-50].

<sup>596</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, par.160, p.106 [157].

<sup>597</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p.27 [52-53].

differend, any political *project*, by virtue of its foreclosing of possibilities and settling of accounts, could be so characterized; Nazism being, on this score, a particularly virulent example which went even to the point of self-destruction (think here of the desperate and self-defeating attempt to speed up the Final Solution even while the Fronts were collapsing). This would appear to rule out the involvement of the philosopher – in Lyotard’s sense of the thinker who employs reflective judgment – in traditional politics, radical or not. For Lyotard, Heidegger must be evaluated as a great thinker, despite his Nazism.<sup>598</sup> More precisely, he was a thinker who grossly violated the injunction of his philosophical calling, who failed despite his greatness to heed to the very end the debt borne by thought towards what is constitutive of it, but also intractable to it.

While Lyotard’s arguments pertaining to Heidegger and the interpretation of his Nazism are incisive and worth considering in their own right, what is of greatest interest to me in the text is the citation of Kant and Freud as two sources or inspirations informing Lyotard’s analysis of the forgotten, “the jews” who are its hostages and its witnesses, and finally, Heidegger’s political failure.<sup>599</sup> Searching to articulate the aforementioned notion that the West, instantiated as Nazism, tried to once and for all cancel its debt to the always already forgotten, Lyotard briefly explores the sublime and *Nachträglichkeit* by way of articulating what it means for thought to imply an unthinkable remainder – and for that matter, a debt towards that remainder.

As regards Kant, we have already seen Lyotard’s reading of the analytic of the sublime as deleterious to the faculty notion of the subject. The reading of Kant in *Heidegger et “les juifs”* is essentially continuous with that of the postmodern period, but makes the links with the artistic avant-gardes more explicit. The reading of avant-gardes as “jews” in turn links the question of art and the sublime onto victimhood and politics; this link will be further explored in subsequent texts.

Extraneous later articles on aesthetics such as “Newman: The Instant” are exemplary here. Investigating painter Barnett Newman under the aegis of the sublime, Lyotard argues that a Newman painting presents, to the extent that it can, its own

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<sup>598</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p.52-53 [88-90].

<sup>599</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5 [17-18].

presentation (or rather it attempts to present presentation, or presence, *tout court*).<sup>600</sup> This renders a Newman painting, or any similar avant-garde artistic gesture, a failure by definition: as was seen with respect to the philosophy of phrases, a phrase cannot present or situate its own presentation (though the latter can be situated in a subsequent phrase). Such a failure, however, succeeds in a manner of speaking to the extent that it presents that-there-is an un-presentable something, an unfathomable material at hand: “When we have been abandoned by meaning, the artist has a professional duty to bear witness that *there is*, to respond to the order to be. The painting becomes evidence, and it is fitting that it should not offer anything that has to be deciphered still less interpreted...Art...must constantly begin to testify anew to the occurrence by letting the occurrence be.”<sup>601</sup> The artistic avant-garde’s “jewishness” is here underscored, not the least because Newman himself was Jewish and influenced by Hebraic philosophy.

Kant will remain an important reference, but Freud also comes back into the picture in an interesting way. Lyotard’s return to Freud in *Heidegger et “les juifs”* is offered, there and in later texts, alongside his reading of the sublime and reflective judgment – not as “analogue”, *per se*, but as “doublet” and, in any case, as matter for loose comparison.<sup>602</sup> The return to Freud is, however, a departure from the prior libidinal philosophy. Whereas in the latter metaphysics Lyotard tried to “drown the thesis of the unconscious in the deluge of a general libidinal economy” (“noyer la thèse de l’inconscient dans le déluge d’une économie libidinale générale”),<sup>603</sup> in the return to Freud the hypothesis of the unconscious is put firmly under the “critical” if not quite Kantian sign of the philosophy of phrases.<sup>604</sup> But what, precisely, does this mean?

The notion of “unconscious affect” or the “affect phrase” is key to Lyotard’s return to Freud. If as Lyotard suggests, what was missing from the libidinal philosophy was a sustained engagement with the singular nature and workings of the unconscious, then what *Le différend* largely lacked was an account of the unconscious and its body in

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<sup>600</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.79 [90]: “A painting by Newman is an angel. It announces nothing; it is in itself the annunciation.”

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*, p.88 [98-99].

<sup>602</sup> Lyotard, *Misère de la philosophie*, p.65, 72.

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60-61.

terms of phrases, of events<sup>605</sup> (a notable exception: paragraph 144 of *Le différend*, which briefly discusses Freud's case study "A child is being beaten"). It is this that Lyotard sketches in bare detail in *Heidegger et "les juifs"*, but gives greater substance to especially in the essays "La phrase-affect" and "Emma" in *Misère de la philosophie*.

Let us unpack this Freudian notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, "unconscious affect" ("deferred action" is another translation, though also admittedly vague). "Unconscious affect", literally, is a feeling deriving not from the order of the conscious and the representational/re-presentable, but the unconscious, cast in terms of a primary process which is of the order of phrases/phrasing. One has a vague feeling that one cannot account for; the addressor pole is indistinct, as well as those of sense and referent. To the extent that the feeling disrupts the order or functioning or even the identity of the person in question, the question also arises as to whom, if anyone, is being addressed. Besides being, in this pervasive in-distinction, a kind of silence, unconscious affect describes a psychological mechanism characterized by an epistemological gap with respect to its causal sequence.

Imagine, as Lyotard invites us to, the introduction of inert, harmless particles into a particular mind, conceived *pace* Freudian metapsychology as a physical/dynamical/topographical system ("la métaphore physique" – "the physical metaphor").<sup>606</sup> In such a scenario "the first blow ... strikes the apparatus without observable internal effect, without affecting it. It is a shock without affect".<sup>607</sup> Imagine further that at a later date "the energy dispersed in the affective cloud condenses, gets organized, brings on an action, commands a flight without a 'real' motive".<sup>608</sup> With the "second blow, there takes place an affect without shock: I buy something in a store, anxiety crushes me, I flee, but nothing really happened".<sup>609</sup> Because the condition of buying something in a store is not in and of itself sufficient to account for the flight, this

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<sup>605</sup> Lyotard, *Misère de la philosophie*, p.65.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*, p.62.

<sup>607</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"*, p.15-16 [34].

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16 [35].

<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*, p.16 [34-35]. Lyotard is alluding here to Freud's "Emma" case study, which he subjects to greater scrutiny in the article by the same name appearing in *Misère de la philosophie*.

flight “informs consciousness *that* there is something, without being able to tell *what* it is”.<sup>610</sup>

On such a model, as far as the patient and analyst are concerned, there is only an affect/effect, such as anxiety, accompanied by a loss of memory – more accurately, a gulf or blank in which nothing was recorded that could have been remembered in the first place. That there was an initial cause is assumed in the very positing of the mechanism of unconscious affect; but if the mechanism works as it should, then the initial cause in the sequence is untraceable temporally, or in its specificity. There is an utter failure of communication, not to mention an apparent suspension/violation of chronological time,<sup>611</sup> evocative of that which occurs in the sublime sentiment, in the operation of unconscious affect. And yet in the “working through” (*Durcharbeitung*)<sup>612</sup> of the talking cure, wherein one attempts the impossible “chronologization” of the first blow which occurred outside of diachrony,<sup>613</sup> one does not thereby abandon the search. In the practice of psychoanalytic listening and testimony, one bears witness to the fact that *something* must have occurred, and this amounts at least to listening to a timbre, in an interminable<sup>614</sup> process of working through. For Lyotard this is the principle on which psychoanalysis, and certainly philosophy and the arts, are based; it is, moreover, structurally identical to the Jewish (and certainly, the “jewish”) injunction to listen to the inarticulate voice of the always already forgotten.

Let us return briefly to the question of strategy. The operation that has occurred here, in the invocation of Kant and Freud, is to flesh out two theoretical articulations of the always already forgotten, the singularity and intractability of the material at hand, and to link these onto concrete human figures and their political martyring. This is significant in showing that certain human beings testify to a differend at the heart of the West. The analysis of the differend in general is in this way concretized, and in such a way that the struggle of the event against totality is made into a political, but for that matter meta-political, anthro-paralogical problem.

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<sup>610</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p.16 [35].

<sup>611</sup> Ibid. and *Misère de la philosophie*, p.69.

<sup>612</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.26 [35].

<sup>613</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p.16 [35].

<sup>614</sup> Ibid., p.20 [41].

For my purposes, then, the major contribution of *Heidegger et "les juifs"* and the surrounding texts on Kant and Freud is to have made the link between the sublime, fine art and ethics/politics clearer; to have put Freud back on the agenda in a complementary way; finally, to have put human faces back on that which resists nihilation/totalization. The text contributes to an anthro-paralogy of resistance to the extent not only that the victims and intractable figures are situated in human history, but that they speak in the name of an intractable, a forgotten, which is constitutive of that which would try to erase it. Here are actual human beings who, while they cannot by definition lend themselves to any revolutionary project,<sup>615</sup> embody the event and for that reason are *de facto* resistant to totalizing projects (including, significantly, contemporary capitalism/technoscience).

### 3.3 – Two Figures of the Inhuman

Lyotard brings these considerations to a greater level of abstraction in *L'inhumain*. The question of *who* is resisting what becomes more clearly and systematically at this point the question of *what, in the who in question*, is resisting what. That which "the jews" attest to, by their thought and their writing (broadly construed to include e.g. painting), but also by their very existence and by the hysterical political reactions they provoke, is treated to a deeper analysis. Lyotard's argument with respect to the always already forgotten is in this way, arguably, purged of what appears to some commentators to be its latent humanism.

In his preface to the text, Lyotard re-affirms and clarifies his commitment to antihumanism by way of a polemic against the neo-humanism of Habermas.<sup>616</sup> This he does by sketching two figures of what he calls "the inhuman". The idea is to thereby escape what is arguably the humanist blackmail of Habermas's argument in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Roughly, Lyotard takes issue with the suggestion that to coherently and consistently resist the pernicious effects of postmodern technoscience one must embrace some version of humanism and/or the faculty subject. In drawing his distinction between the two kinds of inhuman, he complicates and arguably renders less certain the categories "human" and "inhuman", while further

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<sup>615</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"*, p.37 [67-68].

<sup>616</sup> As plotted out, alongside a sustained critique of selected "Nietzschean" thinkers in Lyotard's tradition, in Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

troubling the Kantian faculty view of subjectivity which Habermas inherits and develops along language-pragmatic lines. This is with a view to laying the groundwork for an argument that one can, with consistency, resist postmodern technoscience while simultaneously resisting humanism.

One of Lyotard's inhuman figures designates postmodern technoscience itself – i.e. the antihumanist, dynamic system which we previously saw partly informs his sociological conception of postmodernity. Recall that in postmodernity, the narrative/narrated figure of the human as such enters a process of disintegration. This can be taken in a double sense: first, incredulity towards grand narratives of universal human emancipation certainly characterizes, to a significant extent, our sociological condition (to take a topical example, witness the cries that timid American healthcare reforms are “communism” or “fascism”, and how people there angrily take to the streets to protect their right to not be able to afford doctors). Secondly, consider the fate of rationality, construed in terms of this or that narrative of human emancipation – for instance, Marcuse's claims that the supposed rationality of “advanced industrial society” is in fact irrational both for failing to promote and for actively nihilating human well-being.<sup>617</sup> In Lyotard's account, such a human-centric view of rationality is increasingly supplanted by that of a largely autonomous instrumental reason which, though originating perhaps in the human, has begun to colonize/cannibalize other spheres of human life.

“Instrumental reason”, as analyzed by Max Horkheimer<sup>618</sup> and other members of the Frankfurt School, designates roughly a goal-directed, future-oriented, problem-solving type of rationality. As Habermas suggests about the advent of “the secular concept of modernity”, “[a]t this time the image of history as a uniform process that generates problems is formed, and time becomes experienced as a scarce resource for the mastery of problems that arise – that is, as the pressure of time”.<sup>619</sup> Essentially given pride of place by modern time-consciousness, instrumental reason is thus reason deployed for the solving of problems under the pressure of time.

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<sup>617</sup> Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1966, p.ix. In his postmodern phase, Lyotard will echo Marcuse when he speaks of “capitalism's regime of pseudorationality and performativity” (*The Postmodern Explained*, p.73 [108]).

<sup>618</sup> Cf. Horkheimer, *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, New York, The Seabury Press, 1974.

<sup>619</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p.5-6.

It is essentially this type of reason which Lyotard argues becomes hegemonic in postmodernity. It is instantiated in a nihilating/totalizing grand narrative – more accurately, a self-perpetuating regime or system – of performativity, efficiency, development, and complexification: what Lyotard calls “the inhumanity of the system which is currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others)”.<sup>620</sup> It is crucial to note that “development” simply indicates here the in principle limitless development of the system itself. As Lyotard describes it, “[t]he striking thing about this metaphysics of development is that it needs no finality. Development is not attached to an Idea [in Kant’s sense], like that of the emancipation of reason and of human freedoms. It is reproduced by accelerating and extending itself according to its internal dynamic alone”.<sup>621</sup> Development is, in the final analysis, neither grounded in nor oriented by a notion of the human good, as suggested indirectly by the increasingly frequent and ever-worsening ecological, social and financial collapses that are its effects.<sup>622</sup> Far from serving human ends, in fact, the direction of the latter seems to be largely self-justifying and is ultimately dictated, in any case, by the necessity of escaping the solar system before heat death occurs: “[development] has thus no end, but it does have a limit, the expectation of the life of the sun.”<sup>623</sup>

Terry Eagleton’s acerbic remarks notwithstanding,<sup>624</sup> Lyotard’s comments on solar heat death are not simply self-indulgent science fiction. Granting the scientifically backed and therefore “rather realistic”<sup>625</sup> claim that the sun will explode in roughly 4.5 billion years, there is a very real limit to life, the process of negative entropy that began on our planet billions of years ago. The continuation of negative entropy past solar heat death is constrained by whether or not “thought can go on without a body”<sup>626</sup> or, more specifically, whether the process of development/complexification can find some kind of “body” capable of surviving outside of the solar system. On the long view instrumental reason has no need of the human, strictly speaking, especially if it can replicate or even

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<sup>620</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman* p.2 [10].

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7 [14].

<sup>622</sup> Not to mention the collapse of the humanities in the University for reasons of “resource optimization”!

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.*, p.7 [14-15].

<sup>624</sup> Eagleton, *After Theory*, New York, Basic Books, 2003, p.37/50.

<sup>625</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.84 [79].

<sup>626</sup> Cf. the article by the same name in Lyotard, *The Inhuman*.

improve upon the causal powers of the brain/body;<sup>627</sup> the developing system is therefore antihumanist and inhuman in its underlying logic, and, as such, can be and in fact appears to be dehumanizing in its effects. Lyotard's point in constructing such a "fable"<sup>628</sup> about cosmic entropy is to illustrate that as a mere moment of negative entropy,<sup>629</sup> the human is likely no longer, if it ever was, the organizing principle of the process of instrumental rationality that it appears to have set in motion with the advent of modernity. As he puts it, "[w]hat a Human and his/her Brain – or rather the Brain and its Human – would resemble at the moment when they leave the planet forever, before its destruction; that, the story does not tell".<sup>630</sup>

Lyotard is actually quite close to Habermas in identifying the ascendancy of this inhuman rationality as highly problematic. For instance, the first figure of the inhuman is fully in keeping with Habermas's encounter with the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann.<sup>631</sup> Luhmann seeks to formulate an explicitly antihumanist social science, replacing the supposedly outmoded concept of the human lifeworld<sup>632</sup> inherited from Husserlian phenomenology with that of autonomous, self-producing and self-regulating "human-neutral" systems acting as each others' environments.<sup>633</sup> In Luhmann we find the human lifeworld definitively left behind by the spheres that have seemingly broken off from it with the advent of modernity (e.g. instrumental reason), and correspondingly social science is reduced to a relatively uncritical descriptive/diagnostic enterprise.<sup>634</sup> Habermas attacks Luhmann here on the grounds that his theory boils down to "a very

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<sup>627</sup> Lyotard, *Misère de la philosophie*, p.123.

<sup>628</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.83 [79]. Lyotard stresses that "this fable asks not that it be believed, only that we reflect on it" (Ibid., p.101 [94].).

<sup>629</sup> "...it seems that the 'ultimate' motor of [capitalism and technoscience] is not essentially of the order of human desire: it consists rather in the process of negentropy which appears to 'work' the cosmic area inhabited by the human race" (Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.71 [83].).

<sup>630</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.83 [79].

<sup>631</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* p.368

<sup>632</sup> In brief, the lifeworld is the intersubjectively constituted and (potentially) historically cumulative context of communication and human experience. The first chapter of Habermas's *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* describes the *modernization* of the lifeworld, i.e. a new future-oriented time-consciousness concurrent with a new autonomy of individuated lifeworld spheres; see also *ibid.* p.313-316.

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid.* p.382

<sup>634</sup> Whereas Habermas sees the modern diremption of lifeworld spheres as an evil to be *combated* with a view to (re)humanization and a recuperation of the promise of modernity, Luhmann sees this diremption as a value-neutral fact to be *described* with a view to greater systems efficiency.

sophisticated defence of technocracy”.<sup>635</sup> Indeed, at Luhmann’s hands, Habermas’s idea of repairing modernity (i.e. identifying and retaining the emancipatory potential of the modern lifeworld) by means of the very communicative tools of the lifeworld itself gives way to a self-satisfied exercise in diagnostics, presumably with no greater aim than increased efficiency.<sup>636</sup> As interpreter C. Fred Alford points out, “Systems theory expresses the primacy of survival”.<sup>637</sup> The survival in question is precisely that of the various systems in play; specifically human survival, as Lyotard is at pains to point out in his fabular account of solar heat death, is not the issue.

Where Lyotard parts company with Habermas is in the details of his attack on the aforementioned colonizing, instrumentally rational system. In seeking to tame instrumental reason, Habermas seeks nothing less than to reunite the faculties, much like Kant, but in terms of, and with the tools provided by, his own theory of communicative action.<sup>638</sup> Lyotard, by contrast, envisions no architectonic of faculties to develop or to return to. Strictly speaking, it is neither the antihumanism nor the “inhumanity” of the system and of systems theory that he finds problematic. Rather than seek to defend, resuscitate and enrich the human lifeworld as Habermas does, Lyotard sketches a second inhumanity in some ways constitutive of but also always already undermining the human. Whereas Habermas resists the system by attempting to reconstruct the human, so to speak, the inner inhumanity flagged by Lyotard is *de facto* resistant to the system; what remains in terms of political action is to bear witness to it, or in other words to engage in a paralogy of the human.

This second figure of the inhuman is in many senses the opposite of the first; it is associated with infancy, vulnerability, promise, abjection and plasticity rather than with instrumentality, striving and bare survival. Lyotard ponders whether “what is ‘proper’ to humankind were to be inhabited by [this] inhuman”;<sup>639</sup> in other words, by a certain plasticity or indeterminacy which is characteristic of the infant and which is “the

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<sup>635</sup> Bausch, “The Habermas/Luhmann Debate and Subsequent Habermasian Perspectives on Systems Theory”, *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* Volume 14, Issue 5, September/October 1997, p.317.

<sup>636</sup> Ibid.

<sup>637</sup> Alford, *Science and the Revenge of Nature*, Gainesville, University Presses of Florida, 1985, p.122.

<sup>638</sup> See especially the second volume of Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1983.

<sup>639</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.2 [10].

infinitely secret [inhuman] of which the soul is hostage”.<sup>640</sup> In texts such as *Lectures d'enfance* and other later writings, Lyotard will accumulate evidence to the effect that this inner inhuman always already inhabits the human. He is to some extent ambiguous in his evaluation of this second inhuman; it is both abject and promising, the simultaneously “miserable and admirable indetermination from which [the soul] was born and does not cease to be born”.<sup>641</sup> And there is a further ambiguity, to be explored in 3.5 below: the plasticity of the second inhuman no doubt lends itself to the instrumentality of the system, in spite of itself. As seen in evolutionary biology, for instance, a flexible system in a changing environment is most usually favoured for survival.

The second inhuman nonetheless proves intractable to the systematicity of the first, even if it should provide it with a crucial, instrumentally viable element of plasticity. According to Lyotard, the first inhuman, that of the system, should not and in any case *cannot* completely assimilate or otherwise take over from the second inhuman associated with infancy: “The system ... has the consequence of causing the forgetting of what escapes it. But the anguish is that of a mind haunted by a familiar and unknown guest which is agitating it, sending it delirious [sic] but also making it think – if one claims to exclude it, if one doesn’t give it an outlet, one agitates it.”<sup>642</sup> What remains of politics in a world increasingly dominated by the inhuman of systems (and/or the system, writ large) is for Lyotard, the resistance to this first, “bad” inhuman by means of making good on the debt one has always already incurred to the second,<sup>643</sup> that is, a witnessing of infancy set to work in order to trouble, if not overcome, systematicity.<sup>644</sup>

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<sup>640</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.2 [10].

<sup>641</sup> Ibid., p.7 [15].

<sup>642</sup> Ibid., p.2 [10].

<sup>643</sup> The idea of a debt with regard to the “good” Inhuman makes sense when one considers Lyotard’s remarks that it both cannot be shut out without ill consequence, and that it is what spurs us to think.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid. p.7 [15]; Lyotard is rather pessimistic with regard to the prospects of a decisive triumph over systematicity.

### 3.4 – Malraux and Augustine: Further Testimony, and an Antihumanist Sketch of Love and Solidarity

In his final writings Lyotard investigated further and in different modes this enduring “creepiness”, to quote Avital Ronell,<sup>645</sup> which he suspects is constitutive of the human. He also wrote more frequently on love and solidarity. This would seem to imply a kind of positive ethical and political content, if not a locus for hope; nonetheless, Lyotard’s reading of these themes is antihumanist and highly melancholic. It remains to be seen what can be done with it. First however, let us examine the relevant particulars as expressed in his late writings on Malraux and Augustine.

#### a) *Malraux*

In his writings on French intellectual, novelist, adventurer, politician and resistance fighter André Malraux, Lyotard employs his anthro-paralogical strategy by seeking out testimonies as well as telltale lapses, fissures, failed passages perhaps, in the biography, novels and aesthetic writings of a single man. In the acknowledgements following the French edition of his late intellectual biography, *Signé Malraux*, Lyotard characterizes the latter, without further comment, as a “hypobiography”.<sup>646</sup> Literally, this would be an *under-biography*, or *beneath-biography*. Lyotard signals, in effect, that *Signé Malraux* digs into the subsoil of Malraux’s biography, his publicly lived and recorded life. The work attempts to detect, describe and where pertinent connect currents of life beneath the life, to find what lurks beneath the man so as to both constitute and undermine the man.

While his hypobiography of Malraux is not, strictly speaking, a psychoanalytical account, recall that Lyotard does employ psychoanalytical concepts such as *Nachträglichkeit* and primary sexual difference to great effect in his later works. He seems at times to interpret certain of Malraux’s own concepts pertaining to subjectivity in this light. The goal however, as noted, is to contribute by way of multiplying testimonies to an understanding of the human as inherently resistant to the system of capitalist

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<sup>645</sup> See Ronell, “On the Unrelenting Creepiness of Childhood: Lyotard, Kid-Tested” in Nouvet, Stahuljak and Still (eds.), *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, pp.139-165.

<sup>646</sup> Lyotard, *Signé Malraux*, p. 355.

techno-science – not, strictly speaking, to explain or map Malraux’s behaviours onto a grid of hidden primary libidinal-economic forces or secondary-elaborated motivations.

The freedom with which Lyotard constructs rather than explains Malraux is, however, troubling. As Williams points out, one can even say that the text “goes beneath the figure and *invents* an André Malraux, one that expresses deeper movements and influences than could be divined from the life proper”.<sup>647</sup> There is a creative dimension to the project, which raises the question of its veracity. Lyotard claims that the text comprises a “mythopoïesis”,<sup>648</sup> certainly a creative endeavour at odds with biographical realism. This does not mean, however, that *Signé Malraux* constitutes an untruth, strictly speaking: “mythopoïesis, as we will see, composes the so-called ‘life’. The authentic is what it signs, not what a third party verifies or confesses”.<sup>649</sup> Lyotard’s hypobiography speaks the truth, is authentic in other words, only because Malraux “signs” it, i.e. it is shot through with that which, in Malraux, be it against the official biographical narrative, is most authentic. In this sense, as Williams interprets it, “Lyotard’s *Malraux* [is] a productive falsehood that operates on and tells the truth about much more than its eponym”.<sup>650</sup> At the very least, it seems, we can read Lyotard’s Malraux as telling us a good deal about Lyotard himself.

What then, precisely, does Lyotard find and/or construct in his hypobiographical engagement with Malraux – not to mention in *Chambre sourde*, the shorter work on Malraux’s “anti-aesthetics”? Or more precisely, what can we make of these texts of Lyotard’s, which Malraux “signs” all over?

At the most general level, in these texts Lyotard depicts the public life and writings of Malraux as a series of experiences of, and serious intellectual engagements with, actually-lived nihilism,<sup>651</sup> coupled, paradoxically on first blush, with a tenacious commitment to humanitarian activism and practical politics. He reads Malraux as having

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<sup>647</sup> Williams, *Lyotard and the Political*, p.1. Italics mine.

<sup>648</sup> Lyotard, *Signed, Malraux*, p.11 [19].

<sup>649</sup> Ibid.

<sup>650</sup> Williams, *Lyotard and the Political*, p.1.

<sup>651</sup> “At the precise instant that the stench [of dead gods] spreads, nihilism ceases to be a skeptical or disabused turn of mind to become the experience of a soul and a body exposed obstinately to abjection. To this kind of phobia that lucidly trains itself at the putrid, Céline, Bataille, Artaud, and Camus pay tribute with a writing at the limit of writing. To append Malraux’s oeuvre to this group is what I intend to do here.” (Lyotard, *Soundproof Room*, p.10). Because the English translation of *Chambre sourde* by Robert Harvey is a bilingual edition, I will refrain from citing the French edition of this text.

lived an ethical/political life as one would create a work of art. It is a gratuitous and wilful project of resistance, though it should be noted that Lyotard is also attuned to the heterogeneity of “Malraux’s” ethical/political will: that within Malraux which resists Malraux, which evades the latter’s control. Lyotard reconstructs Malraux’s childhood experiences, his experiences with women, with his own body, with Asian cultures, with wars, with natural environments, and finally with political movements and figures as a life driven by, and lived in negotiation with, a core, inhuman subjectivity.

According to Lyotard, and this is especially plausible when reading Malraux’s early novel *La voi royale*, the Malraux-ian universe is at bottom a cyclical and indefinite process of becoming. This universe, so to speak, takes root in Malraux at a very early age.<sup>652</sup> Beings in the universe simply grow, thrive for a time, die, and then rot away. As anyone who has observed a compost pile will know, rotting is itself always pregnant with new life – and this means that the process of becoming is indefinitely renewed: “Rather than be extinguished by the languid swarming of the creatures in the dungeons where gods and heroes rot along with the rest, life is regenerated there. Death, be it chosen – suicide – appears to end life only from the myopic viewpoint of an ego on the line. It is actually the scheming of reproduction, a mere moment in the redundancy of the same.”<sup>653</sup>

Talk of “scheming” (“manigance”)<sup>654</sup> would seem to indicate something like a Hegelian “ruse of history” at play. But for Malraux there is no “result” in this perpetual renewal of life through death, in the Hegelian sense of the negation of the negation producing a conceptually higher manifestation of the starting point. Rather, a being merely grows, thrives, dies, and then rots away, leaving by way of its death the germ of other beings which are essentially identical to it from a cosmological perspective: “Death and birth are indistinguishable, like beginning and end in a perpetual cycle where simple convention discriminates between departure and arrival ... Plants, animals, humans, and cultures: everything will begin again.”<sup>655</sup> This is another figure of Hegelian “spurious infinity”, ascribed to Lyotard’s own method above but here thought to be a feature of the universe itself.

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<sup>652</sup> Lyotard, *Signed, Malraux*, p.1-3 [9-11].

<sup>653</sup> Lyotard, *Soundproof Room*, p.12.

<sup>654</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>655</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

Malraux's picture evokes Hegel's system in another interesting way. The process described by Malraux evokes the moment of negativity that is a conceptually necessary step in any process. As in Hegel, one finds in Malraux the idea that nature is a negative, inertial force that is indifferent to, and which to varying degrees drags down, the historical being of humankind. Like plants in a jungle, all human beings grow, thrive for a time, die and rot away. So do their cultures and civilizations,<sup>656</sup> their works and aspirations. While Hegel can take cold comfort in the claim that even the most inertial expression of nature manifests the rational telos of God or Spirit, Malraux paints a far bleaker picture. No matter what heights the human being or humankind may reach, the best that can be hoped for by any man or woman is to leave behind grandiose monuments or accomplishments that will survive for a time to communicate "stridently"<sup>657</sup> across the cycles of the infernal same: "One must act within history, not for it. History is incorrigible. It can merely offer opportunities for the will to prove itself – within and without – against infamy".<sup>658</sup> Malraux's youthful excursion to the Cambodian jungle to steal sculptures from Khmer temples, mythologized in his novel *La voie royale*, is meaningful in this light: he literally sought to tear monuments to the human spirit from a place teeming with rot, so that they might speak across ages.

Nature, then, is for Malraux the eternal irony of historical humankind. Here I am paraphrasing Hegel, who designates Woman as the eternal irony of the human community.<sup>659</sup> Woman, for Hegel, occupies the place of negativity, analogous to nature. The same is true of Malraux: "women are, like the jungle, figures of the irremediable".<sup>660</sup> Woman for him denotes the womb, the hearth, the cyclical process of menstruation, in short, all that drags down the "virile fraternity"<sup>661</sup> of artists and adventurers who will populate Malraux's life, novels, and aesthetic writings.

Malraux's account of existential striving is, then, deeply problematic to the extent that it privileges a stereotypically warlike, adventurist "male" type of experience as authentically human. As Lyotard recounts, Malraux is troubled by femininity all his life,

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<sup>656</sup> Lyotard, *Soundproof Room*, p. 18: "Civilizations are subjected to the same revolution as the living and the stars."

<sup>657</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76-81, and *Signed, Malraux*, p.143 [164].

<sup>658</sup> Lyotard, *Signed, Malraux*, p.121 [140].

<sup>659</sup> Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1977, p.288.

<sup>660</sup> Lyotard, *Signed, Malraux*, p.109 [126].

<sup>661</sup> *Ibid.*, p.138 [158].

shying away from what he sees as its thwarting, negating force, only to return to it to mitigate his loneliness and desire for recognition. He explicitly distances himself from the claim that women are inferior, but he does claim that they are absolutely other in their sexual difference.<sup>662</sup> In many ways, his life's work and exploits are an attempt to raise himself above what he deems to be an all-too-natural femininity.

Like Hegel, Malraux also associates Asia with this negative, feminine principle. Malraux's Asia is a land of people who have essentially come to terms with ("welcomed with veneration and dealt with wisely")<sup>663</sup> the infernal same. At best, such peoples have created singular artworks and religions speaking across ages. This to some extent accounts for Malraux's fascination upon meeting Mao; he found himself face to face with the man who, in his eyes, moved all of China out a timeless, cyclical torpor and into virile, fraternal history. Similarly, Malraux's meeting with Nehru is recalled in terms of the monumental task that the man faced in having to shape what Malraux saw as the dreamlike, ineffectual material of India into a modern political entity.<sup>664</sup>

Such motivating obsessions regarding nature, negativity and the like come out especially in Malraux's bizarre and ill-fated attempt to organize a more or less politically independent volunteer air force to fight on the side of the Republic in the Spanish Civil War. As Lyotard interprets him, Malraux revels like a child in the experience of flying far above the infernal, larval, natural earth.<sup>665</sup> He feels an intense thrill in dropping bombs on the earth below; Franco and his movement represent the infernal same, and accordingly he likens his fascist targets to insects that he crushes beneath his feet.<sup>666</sup>

Malraux is, in short, a young boy condemned to forever repeat the process of tearing himself away from the feminine hearth by ever more grandiose adventures that only lead him back to where he started. Thus interpreting his primary motivation, as an obsessive desire to distance himself from feminine, cyclical, ahistorical nature, one can make some sense of his aesthetic and activist gestures. As regards activism and politics, Lyotard's view is that the analysis of Malraux's adventure in Spain should be generally

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<sup>662</sup> Lyotard, *Signed, Malraux*, p.197 [227].

<sup>663</sup> *Ibid.*, 95 [111-112].

<sup>664</sup> Malraux's meetings with Mao and Nehru are recounted in his *Anti-memoirs* (Toronto, New York and London, Bantam Books, 1970).

<sup>665</sup> Lyotard, *Signed, Malraux*, p.184-185 [213].

<sup>666</sup> *Ibid.*, p.185 [213].

extended: “[His] revulsion at fascism, Nazism, Francoism, and, later, Stalinism is only political in appearance ... Beneath the flashiness of parades – brown, black, red alike – he hears ‘Long live death’ and smells the stench of rampant vermin.”<sup>667</sup> More generally still, for metaphysical reasons Malraux is “not political”: “he is incapable of believing in radiant futures”.<sup>668</sup>

Regarding aesthetics, Malraux sought by such gestures as the theft of Khmer statues and obsessive cataloguing to create a kind of “museum without walls”<sup>669</sup> – housing works, but in principle also deeds and lives, which communicate inarticulately across cyclical time. He sought some presence in the artwork or deed which could speak for a time, across and in spite of the amnesia implied by the eternal sameness of becoming: “A soul’s initial encounter with a work or a situation puts it in a state of wonder. The soul had been sleeping. Suddenly it is awakened. It will go back to sleep”.<sup>670</sup> This echoes Lyotard’s notion of infancy as passibility to the event, as haunting presence. Despite the fact that the initiatory power of works fades in the eyes of those who have already seen them, Malraux devoted a considerable portion of his life to sharing them with others via cataloguing the traces of what is resistant to the given that he sought to escape.

Resistance in fact becomes a privileged category of Malraux’s thought. At the level of the subject, he theorizes and in a sense prioritizes a presence which, apart from its sensitivity to the stridency which speaks across ages in works of art and gestures, simply *resists*. Recovering from a stroke in the last years of his life, he recalled waking up on the floor of his hospital room, on all fours, conscious only of existing, and wanting to continue existing, and nothing more: “This tourist trip through the archipelago of death disregards any sequence of events, lays bare only the most inchoate and most intense consciousness, the convulsive ‘I am’.”<sup>671</sup> He went on to describe this state to which he had been stripped as a *je-sans-moi*, an “I without a self”<sup>672</sup> – in other words, a primordial,

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<sup>667</sup> Lyotard, *Soundproof Room*, p.16.

<sup>668</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

<sup>669</sup> Lyotard, *Signed, Malraux*, p.304-305 [347-349].

<sup>670</sup> *Ibid.*, p.30 [38].

<sup>671</sup> Malraux quoted in Lyotard, *Soundproof Room*, p.38.

<sup>672</sup> *Ibid.*, p.38/39.

minimal, non-facultary subjectivity resembling the later Lyotard's radical Freudian/Kantian influenced rendering of the subject.

The status of this *je-sans-moi* with regard to Malraux's cosmology and its ethical/political implications is of course ambiguous; it is, after all, a larval presence within us. It resists, but so do the actual larvae trod underfoot in the Cambodian jungles. It does not escape the infernal same, but rather seems to be of its order: "[it] is the same scum as the vermin that will come swarming across my remains. Its resistance to my death, suspending it for an instant on the threshold, *is* also my death."<sup>673</sup> It thus gives the lie to the idea that the human is intrinsically above the order of the natural; rather, the human resists like all natural things and, *in addition*, as resistance-plus-ego, can sometimes speak resistance as such through works of art and deeds, and lives lived as works of art. The *je-sans-moi* is therefore an antihumanist figure; for Malraux, who fought his whole life on the side of the oppressed, "the sole companion of the separated ones, the down-and-out, the offended ones, is the inhuman".<sup>674</sup>

Malraux will build from this inhuman, from the *je-sans-moi*, a strange account of love and solidarity. In *La condition humaine*, one of the principle characters is surprised to hear how strange his speech sounds when played on a vinyl record. His interlocutor tells him that he is unaccustomed to hearing his own voice – one usually hears the voices of others with the ears, but "hears" one's own voice with one's throat, experiencing one's own body as a kind of unnoticed, parasitic presence that rides beneath one's speech. The idea of love becomes clear for this character when his wife sleeps with another man, and he feels that their throats have become unsoldered; when they were in love, he shared with her the intimacy of this inarticulate presence that Malraux calls the sentiment of brute existence, the *je-sans-moi*; in a manner of speaking, each of them was for the other an intimate stranger inhabiting and helping to constitute their subjectivity. In *Les noyers de l'Altenburg* Malraux describes a gassing in the First World War in similar terms: the suffocating, dying soldiers reach out to each other in a communion of suffering that is no more than multiple, larval bodies sharing a single death.

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<sup>673</sup> Lyotard, *Soundproof Room*, p.68.

<sup>674</sup> *Ibid.*, p.58.

In both cases, Malraux has highlighted that there is resistance, in terms of the ethic and the aesthetics he describes, and then there is the elusive fact of an unspoken resisting-together, a vibration on the same wavelength of embodiment, loneliness and misery, a striving and suffering which is the stuff of love and solidarity. “Solitude is shared in these moments when dreadful nothingness stridulates from the gaping ego ... Only extreme moments of dread have on occasions, universal value.”<sup>675</sup> But this universal value is not the stuff of a political community, nor of a *sensus communis*, a community of taste/sensibility:

...Bataille and others following [Malraux] are tempted to derive the project of an ‘authentic’ community from fusional [i.e. larval] community – yet another modern illusion that redundancy soon sweeps up and tips into the grave pit for reproduction. According to Malraux, no institution can be established on the strange epidemic of the inaudible ... Even in the museum without walls no work is assured of encountering the ear that agrees to undergo the ordeal of stridency. Singularities fuse only to the extent that they cannot exchange or hear each other. No dialectic can pick out the multiplicity in unity. Poematics lends itself neither to politics nor to ethics.<sup>676</sup>

Lyotard is especially interested in this inhuman ethical subject, as it fits essentially with his notion of the “good” inhuman core of the human. The *je-sans-moi* is not a subject in the faculty, Kantian sense, but rather lies at the core of such a subject, as an inarticulate feeling of existence and a desire to exist which helps constitute it, and in doing so, to undercut it. In the life and writings of Malraux, Lyotard has found and/or constructed a different way of articulating his own commitment to bear witness to that which resists in and beneath the human subject. Moreover, to the extent that this figure admits of a kind of inchoate togetherness and resisting-together, it seems to open the way to an extremely minimal notion of love and solidarity. To the extent that Lyotard’s Malraux is a construction, however, it is a fair question how far such mythopoetic, hypobiographical writing may be taken as anthro-paralogical *evidence*.

#### b) *Augustine*

Like the works on Malraux preceding it, Lyotard’s posthumous *La confession d’Augustin* could seem something of an odd engagement on first blush: it sketches, after

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<sup>675</sup> Lyotard, *Soundproof Room*, p.92/94.

<sup>676</sup> *Ibid.*, p.102.

all, a study of a canonized Christian thinker claimed by both the modern and phenomenological traditions in philosophy. The book fits, however, into the strategy I have here identified. It is plausible to interpret it as an attempt to rescue Augustine from a certain history of philosophy – one that would relegate his status to that of having been an important precursor to Descartes and Husserl, a prototypical philosopher of the phenomenological subject. Lyotard constructs an Augustine whose thinking of the subject in its relation to God and to time is not simply inaugural but also highly troubled and of enduring, contemporary relevance. Lyotard emphasizes the breathlessness of Augustine’s writing, which betrays something of a lover’s anxiety: a feeling of the impermanence and gratuity of the beloved’s embrace, even, and especially perhaps, as one is being possessed by him. Augustine is quite self-consciously plagued by the gravity of his own flesh, the gratuity of the event of grace, and a sense of the unavoidable belatedness of his conversion. Under Lyotard’s pen, Augustine inaugurates the phenomenological subject but in doing so also deftly demonstrates its dissonances. His *Confessions*, in other words, are an excellent source of anthro-paralogical material.<sup>677</sup>

In this sense, one finds in *La confession d’Augustin* many of the same themes and terms as animate the work on Malraux – as well as, for that matter, those at play in the critical re-reading of Kant and the return to Freud. For my purposes the main thing to retain from this unfinished work is the reading of Augustine’s conversion as well as the mode of his confession in light of these aforementioned themes and terms. Lyotard finds in Augustine a witness to God’s grace – which is to say, in Lyotard’s terms, another witness to the always already forgotten, the infant inhuman, or the event. The particular witnessing of these latter by Augustine is not without its own particularities, which Lyotard draws out and explores with a view to adding testimony as per his over-arching strategy.

With respect to the conversion, Lyotard focuses on the time-lag both implied by and to some extent openly confessed in Augustine’s account. One recalls that Augustine

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<sup>677</sup> Note also that Augustine’s masterpiece, from which Lyotard draws, is called *Confessions*, plural, and that Lyotard’s text is *La confession* [singular] *d’Augustin*. The title is thus triply ambiguous: a) Augustine makes a central confession in the *Confessions* that Lyotard will examine; b) Lyotard acts as Augustine’s confessor in the text; c) Lyotard is “confessing Augustine” in the sense that Augustine is his secret to confess, a hidden inspiration or tributary. Room can be made for all three interpretations, but I am especially drawn to the possibilities evoked by the third.

did not convert all at once, at the force of a single blow. Rather, the conversion proper occurred when the grace-event, if and when the latter can be said to have “occurred”, strictly speaking, was indexed to him “after” the fact by the everyday happenings of “the Milanese garden where [he] cries prostrate on the ground.”<sup>678</sup> The conversion is essentially of a piece with Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, but cast in theological terms. The visit from God, the grace-event or “absolute visit”<sup>679</sup> “subverts the space-time of the creature”,<sup>680</sup> i.e. outstrips the capacities of the I that is visited and which tries in its way to absorb in some way and later confess the visit. Witnessing implying a situating of a presentation, and hence a periodization or “chronologization”,<sup>681</sup> the witness to God’s grace necessarily fails to do justice to the grace-event; the archiving of the blow that is grace, insofar as it is of God, if He has actually been received, destroys the very conditions of its archivability.<sup>682</sup> This is to say that if by definition the infinite cannot be archived, its reception, as a kind of original trauma, in any case short-circuits the attempt. Conversion will have happened, when it has happened, through and as the secondary workings of signs, affects, symptoms.

Elsewhere Lyotard describes the primary blow of the grace-event in terms of “a cut, in the sense of *n*-dimensional space theory. An *n*-dimensional space-time folds around the naturally three-dimensional volume of the body: what would cut into the latter body, a plane for example, which indeed separates two regions of space, loses this property when inserted into four-dimensional space. Its function becomes that of a line in ours or that of a point in a plane, either of which cut nothing”.<sup>683</sup> Differently put, the grace-event should be understood in the precise sense of a cut which, depending on the dimension from which one views or conceives of it, is not a cut (i.e. does not strictly speaking bisect anything). The body of the confessant is not so much violently cut by grace as subtly permeated and/or undone; Lyotard speaks on this count of “[t]he body, sponge-like in its permeability to the other space-time [i.e. God’s]”.<sup>684</sup> In other words, in the grace-event “[t]he soul has not penetrated into the angelic spheres, but a little of the

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<sup>678</sup> Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2000, p.16 [34].

<sup>679</sup> Ibid., p.6 [22].

<sup>680</sup> Ibid., p.17 [35].

<sup>681</sup> Lyotard, *Heidegger and “the jews”*, p.16 [35].

<sup>682</sup> Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.8 [24-25].

<sup>683</sup> Ibid., p.10 [27].

<sup>684</sup> Ibid., p.11 [28].

absolute – is it thinkable? – has encrypted itself within it, and the soul knows nothing of it.”<sup>685</sup> The question for Lyotard, concerned as he is with bearing witness to the event, is as follows: “Where can an absolute visit be situated or placed in relation, in a biography [e.g. Augustine’s]? How can it be related?”<sup>686</sup>

Just as the first blow in the mechanism of *Nachträglichkeit* is to be grasped or come to terms with, if at all, by an impoverished and interminable “working-through”, the moment of conversion must be reconstructed, or rather constructed, as best one can but never adequately, through confession. The attempt will necessarily fail, since to confess is to bring “to language what eludes language.”<sup>687</sup> Moreover, “[t]he strike of conversion is not one single blow delivered once and for all; it is not a shower of repeated blows either. No, confessional writing bears the fissure along with it. Augustine confesses his God and confesses himself not because he is converted: he becomes converted or tries to become converted while making confession. Conversion is the fissure in the grain of confession ...”<sup>688</sup> The grace-event is, in other words, of the order of the future anterior: in a manner of speaking, confessing one’s God paradoxically *precedes* conversion to one’s God. One must reconstruct one’s conversion through writing, “tarrying”<sup>689</sup> in diachronic time with an absolute event that shatters diachrony: since God “comes” outside of space-time, as an *n*-dimensional cut, one’s confession of God necessarily takes the paradoxical form of the time and the breath it takes to render that which happened outside of time.

As further regards the mode of confession, specifically with respect to who or what confesses, the confessing I that is Augustine is essentially a being shattered; it is not reducible to the Cartesian or Husserlian-phenomenological I, readings of Augustine as forerunner to both notwithstanding. Lyotard puts things in terms of an “inner human” who is the witness to the absolute visit, not inasmuch as it receives and testifies to the visit (too anthropological), but that it is itself the testimony:

Not memory, then, but the said inner human, who is neither man nor inner, woman and man, an outside inside. This is the only witness of the presence of the Other, of the other of presence...The inner human does not bear witness to a fact, to a violent event that it would have seen, that it would have heard, tasted or touched. It does not give

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<sup>685</sup> Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.53 [77].

<sup>686</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6 [22].

<sup>687</sup> *Ibid.*, p.26 [46].

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*, p.49 [72-73].

<sup>689</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8 [25].

testimony, it is the testimony...The inner human does not evoke an absence. It is not there for the other; it is the Other of the there, who is there...<sup>690</sup>

Essentially the inner human is Lyotard's "good", infant inhuman – another version of Malraux's *je-sans-moi*. The splitting of the confessing I is not, however, altogether tantamount to the abject condition that Lyotard elsewhere describes in the later writings. Confession is written "posthumously";<sup>691</sup> one is, effectively, born again in the working-through of the grace-event.

More specifically, the issue for Lyotard's Augustine is not simply one of having been wounded, forced, violated<sup>692</sup> and, hence, "abjected" by grace, an event to which one does not consent by definition. Rather it is a matter of thereby reaching a state of vital over-fullness, the extension of the faculty/sensorial human infinitely beyond its limits: "The confessing I looks for words and, contrary to all expectation, those that come to him are those that make physiology work to the point of pushing the body's sensorial and hence sensual powers to the infinite".<sup>693</sup> This is a function of the fact that "grace does not demand a humiliated, mortified body; rather, it increases the faculties of the flesh beyond their limits, and without end...Grace rarely takes a less dialectical turn, less negativist, less repressive. In Augustine, flesh bestowed with grace fulfills its desire, in innocence."<sup>694</sup> The witness to the event is here enraptured, a state hinted at in the discussion of the sublime and hearkening back to the fourfold "yes" of *Économie libidinale*, distinct in the final analysis from the melancholy and morbidity emphasized in Lyotard's other examples (such as Malraux).

Taken together, then, the works on Malraux and Augustine fall into the later Lyotard's overall anthro-paralogical strategy: they bear witness to the inhuman which inhabits the human. They are admittedly contentious, since Lyotard's Malraux is a creative interpretation, and his Augustine goes against a widely accepted historical interpretation. They also clear what amounts to an admittedly very minimal ground for radical hope. In the case of Malraux, as we saw, there is room for a minimal account of

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<sup>690</sup> Lyotard, *The Confession of Augustine*, p.7 [23-24].

<sup>691</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28 [48].

<sup>692</sup> References abound in the text to the "forcing", the making-woman of Augustine, e.g. *ibid.*, p.2-3 [18-19].

<sup>693</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11 [29].

<sup>694</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12 [29].

love and solidarity, or blind, mute communion of the inhuman in oneself with the inhuman in others; in the case of Augustine, there is room in the undermining of the subject for love of the event (construed as God) and the elation that comes with grace.

### 3.5 – “The Witness is a Traitor”

Before moving on to a more global and far-reaching assessment of Lyotard’s legacy in the next chapter, I will briefly explore his own reservations or concerns with respect to what I have called his anthro-paralogical strategic turn. These are distinct from those which I flagged at the outset of this chapter, i.e. the problems of paradox and tactical effectiveness. In a word, Lyotard suggests at certain points in the later writings that the witness to the inhuman core of the human has been backed into a corner: on his own view, the strategy he pursues is necessary, but inadequate – perhaps even pernicious in its own way.

The assessment at the end of *L’inhumain*, that “the witness is a traitor”,<sup>695</sup> nicely encapsulates these reservations. But what does this pronouncement mean? As we have seen, for the later Lyotard, there is only “one question left”: that of the nature of the human, or that part of human nature which resists or attempts to resist the *mainmise*, the taking-in-hand of the human by complexification/development.<sup>696</sup> Grappling with this question is all-important for the later Lyotard, for as we saw, all that remains of politics in his later writings is testimony to an inhuman resistance at the heart of the human. But such bearing-witness is not politically/ethically unproblematic; rather, it is undertaken in the knowledge that it is a kind of betrayal.

Kent Still, in his introduction to *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*, does not appear to have fully conveyed, in my view, the full meaning and seriousness of Lyotard’s pronouncement that the witness is a traitor. He chalks it up to a way of expressing that the witness, say the artist, philosopher, or psychoanalyst, necessarily fails to do justice to the material at hand in her testimony, and thereby in a manner of speaking “betrays” it. This is indeed Lyotard’s view, as we have seen: to link onto a phrase is to situate its presentation, to render determinant something far

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<sup>695</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.204 [215].

<sup>696</sup> Lyotard, *Misère de la philosophie*, p.124.

outstripping any possible response. Something more, however, is meant by Lyotard's comment that the witness is a traitor. In a very literal sense, I believe, he is suggesting that although one must bear witness to that which resists, doing so is to fuel the very system to which the event is resistant. A fuller version of passage from which Still draws is as follows:

The witness of the wrongs and the suffering engendered by thinking's *différend* with what it does not manage to think, this witness, the writer, the megalopolis is quite happy to have him or her, his or her witnessing may come in useful. Attested, suffering and the untameable are as if already destroyed. I mean that in witnessing, one also exterminates. The witness is a traitor.<sup>697</sup>

“Megalopolis” is here shorthand for the technoscientific system that Lyotard describes and resists. As we saw, the system in question is pernicious and totalitarian to the extent that it forecloses events. Since the event is that-which-arrives, that which erupts into/as presence, in seeking to foreclose the event the system strives for a state of pure *self*-presence: a state of totality in which there is no unaccountable remainder, and, as far as the dimension of time is concerned, no future and no surprises. To achieve such a state, however, the system must be open, must penetrate into what at a given moment constitutes the hidden side of things, becoming ever more complex in the process. This is, incidentally, why Lyotard alternates between the terms “development” and “complexification”: to develop towards pure self-presence is to foreclose an increasingly larger set of events and therefore to become more and more open and complex. Something like Freud's death drive dissimulated as life drive is operative here: just as for the Freud of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* the organism seeks a state of perfect equilibrium, i.e. death or “Nirvana”, by a circuitous route becoming ever more complex and dynamic, the technoscientific system seeks a mastery of time and “nature” by becoming selfsame with these latter. This entails a program of thoroughgoing research into the material at hand which would render the latter transparent, fully present: the event domesticated, as a datum in a bank. Echoing Heidegger's thinking of the *Ge-stell* or “enframing” metaphysics of modern technology,<sup>698</sup> Lyotard depicts the process of

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<sup>697</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.204 [215].

<sup>698</sup> *Ibid.*, p.69 [80-81]. See also Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”, in In Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York, Grand Rapids, Philadelphia, St. Louis, San Francisco, London, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto, Harper and Row, Publishers, 1977, p.19-23.

development/complexification as striving to render the material at hand as material ready-to-hand, i.e. stock or, more accurately, “standing-reserve”.<sup>699</sup>

It does not matter that development/complexification may never be able to pull this off entirely. As far as the constitutively haunted human being is concerned, at least, the process of foreclosure is sufficiently terroristic to call forth resistance on its own. But bearing witness to this resistance, which Lyotard prescribes, is itself a kind of research of the type demanded by the system; the witness uncovers that which in the human resists, perhaps, but at the ultimate expense of the latter. As Lyotard puts it, “[t]he pursuit of greater complexity asks not for the perfecting of the Human, but its mutation or its defeat for the benefit of a better performing system ... [and] [e]ven the criticisms [humans] may make of development, its inequality, its inconsistency, its fatality, its inhumanity, even these criticisms are expressions of development and contribute to it”.<sup>700</sup>

Suppose that testimony is produced as to the limitations and resistances of the human with respect to the system. On the one hand, to the extent that such is possible the system may attempt to simply “tweak” the human accordingly: what Lyotard calls “the mutation” of the human “for the benefit of a better performing system”.<sup>701</sup> Bear in mind on this count not only human biotechnologies with eugenic applications, but also strategies to cope with the pathologies of work in contemporary advanced capitalist societies. Mass depression, neurosis and psychosis due to inhuman/inhumane working conditions are now treated by medication and self-medication, as well as the softer strategies of human development seminars, “American Buddhism”<sup>702</sup> and so on. Radical slogans from May 68 regarding worker self-management and the aestheticization of daily life have in this way been largely recuperated by the system in the name of its own efficiency, i.e. the very instrumental rationality such slogans were intended to resist. In this way resistance is emptied of its resistant, not to speak of its revolutionary potential in the very act of bearing witness: it becomes a diagnostic exercise for the system.

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<sup>699</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology”, p.17.

<sup>700</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.99 [92-93].

<sup>701</sup> *Ibid*, p.99 [92].

<sup>702</sup> For example, I do not know personally many practitioners of yoga who do it for its own sake. It is most often taken up so that the practitioner can be more “balanced” and therefore more productive and better able to cope with the demands of their jobs.

If, however, some core aspect of the resistance of the human truly amounts to a form of recalcitrance, then there is a second option: from the perspective of development/complexification, it may simply be necessary to leave the human behind, or at least to render it unrecognizable as such. This would be what Lyotard calls “the defeat” of the human “for the benefit of a better performing system”.<sup>703</sup> Such a situation is not so implausible: solar heat death will, after all, pose a problem for whatever must cope with it (if “life” there will still be on earth), and this entails speculation on the nature of whatever could, in reality, cope with it. This scenario is also borne out by transhumanist theses in debates on the future of human biotechnologies, where the stakes are not a better functioning human being, but a better functioning being which may be unrecognizable as human. If by bearing witness to human resistance one risks diagnosing the general outline or even the precise nature of how the human must be adjusted, one also risks diagnosing the human as obsolete.

What all of this means for Lyotard’s later ethos is that bearing witness, which is to say participating in the only politics that is left, amounts to a work of mourning. There is arguably a kind of militancy in the later Lyotard, since his stance can be plausibly read as a staunch resistance to the system. It is a militancy, however, which has been almost if not altogether emptied of positive content. One resists in the sense that one struggles interminably against an adversary that will always, barring radical hope – Heidegger’s “only a god can save us”<sup>704</sup> – incorporate and crush in some way what resists it. There is no utopia possible in such a scenario – but then neither, if we follow Lyotard, is one desirable. In a debate with Rorty, he claims that it seems to him that “there is no political alternative to liberal democracy. That’s why I don’t think it’s fair for Rorty or others to authorize themselves to hear resonances of Leftism, revolution, or even terrorism in my defense [sic] of the differend”.<sup>705</sup>

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<sup>703</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.99 [92].

<sup>704</sup> “...philosophy will be unable to effect any immediate change in the current state of the world. This is true not only of philosophy but of all purely human reflection and endeavor. Only a god can save us. The only possibility available to us is that by thinking and poetizing we prepare a readiness for the appearance of a god, or for the absence of a god in [our] decline, insofar as in view of the absent god we are in a state of decline ... We can not bring [God] forth in our thinking. At best we can awaken a readiness to wait [for him].” (Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us”: The *Spiegel* Interview (1966)”. Accessed February 17, 2011, at <http://www.ditext.com/heidegger/interview.html>.)

<sup>705</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.133 [119].

Setting aside the admittedly important question of the psychological tenability of constant and purely negative resistance, there is also Lyotard's claim that one "has" to resist:<sup>706</sup> the nature of this prescription, as we have repeatedly seen, is such that Lyotard has not given it a ground outside of his political will. To resist is in any case to collaborate; the consciousness of the philosopher, artist, or psychoanalyst is therefore, to the extent that she takes up the position of resistance fighter, an unhappy consciousness.

What, then, of the aforementioned possibility of a radical hope? What of the link between the "last" Heidegger and the "last" Lyotard? For one thing, it is notable that in different ways, both thinkers turn to the realm of art.<sup>707</sup> And if "only a god can save us" according to Heidegger, it is perhaps notable on this score that Lyotard died while writing his book on Augustine: the "hero" of politics will truly be the event, the eruption of a state of grace. But as flagged already in *Le différend*, one does not make a political project out of such a position. One witnesses and one waits, with unhappy consciousness; one does so, moreover, while the global south goes through paroxysms of suffering and struggle, and while capital and technoscience continue to unravel and cannibalize what remains of the planet's life support system and the human lifeworld.

If we do not believe that this radical hope is enough – if we believe that it must be welded to or supplanted by a form of practical engagement taking place outside of the text or the gallery, i.e. on the streets, on the factory floor, in the academy and in the home – then the picture drawn in these first three chapters will seem bleak. Lyotard produced some original and brilliant engagements with philosophical, artistic and political questions and subject matters, but ultimately he ended his life as a failed militant who did not and could not have grounded his self-admittedly extremely minimal and melancholic strategy. Politically speaking, there would appear to be little reason to engage with his writings, save as a cautionary tale. One contribution of the next chapter will be to bolster this impression with a sustained critique, in particular meeting the later Lyotard on his own ground: that is, by evaluating his cautious and ironical commitment to liberal democracy.

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<sup>706</sup> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, p.128 [140].

<sup>707</sup> Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology", p.35.

Having constructed a minimal line of criticism in the first three chapters, in the next I will submit Lyotard's work to a more sustained, two-part criticism. In the first place, I will re-visit and enrich the philosophical/methodological critique advanced in Chapter 1, paying particular attention to how certain major interpreters have linked on the Lyotard's philosophy. I will proceed to a development of the political critique that I have advanced throughout all three chapters, taking the later Lyotard at his evidently ironical word that he is an interlocutor in the sphere of liberal democracy.

## Chapter 4: Critical Assessments

...there is no question here of proposing a “pure” alternative to the system: we all know now, as the 1970s come to a close, that an attempt at an alternative of that kind would end up resembling the system it was meant to replace.

- Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*

The *status quo* was to be implacably resisted, but not in the name of alternative values – a logically impossible manoeuvre. This disenchantment, in turn, was to yield the full-blown pessimism of some later postmodern thought.

- Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*

Those who believe that normativity is always negative are also likely to hold that authority is always suspect. In this, they differ from radicals, who respect the authority of those with long experience fighting injustice, or of laws which safeguard people’s physical integrity or working conditions. Similarly, some modern-day cultural thinkers seem to believe that minorities are always more vibrant than majorities. It is not the most popular of beliefs among the disfigured victims of Basque separatism. Some fascist groups, however, may be flattered to hear it, along with UFO buffs and Seventh Day Adventists. It was majorities, not minorities, which confounded imperial power in India and brought down apartheid. Those who oppose norms, authority and majorities as such are abstract universalists, even though most of them oppose abstract universalism as well.

- Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*

To this point I have charted why and how Lyotard grappled with the problem of formulating an ethical antihumanism. It appears to have been a decisive problem, if at times admittedly more or less of a latent one, throughout his writings; that is to say, whether he put them squarely and clearly on the agenda or not, antihumanism and ethics always appear to be in tension in Lyotard’s works. In the early writings he sits uneasily with the notion of the human, to the extent that it must be squared with the methodological materialism of a practically committed Marxism enriched and opened up by phenomenology. In the libidinal phase, he pushes his basic commitment to methodological materialism as far as possible along the lines of a Freudian libidinal-economic metaphysics – which is to say, he apparently violates his methodology in trying to espouse it – discarding humanism as well as moral/normative questions along the way. In the pagan/postmodern phase Lyotard turns to language pragmatics,

Heideggerian/Levinasian ontology and Kant's philosophy of judgment in an attempt to purify his philosophy of metaphysics, both retain and deepen his antihumanism, and also be able to address questions of justice and basic normativity. Finally, in the later works he flirts by turns with political despair and some very minimal glimmers of hope as a result of his attempt to manoeuvre politically and ethically in light of a strategically paralogical reading of the human.

If I am right, then the tension between antihumanism and ethics has proven a productive interpretive key. For one thing, it has helped to build what I think is a plausible and more or less global account of Lyotard's work. The globality of my interpretation, however, will probably rub certain sympathetic readers of Lyotard the wrong way. It might be objected that I miss the point in a fundamental way by giving what appears to be a nihilating-religious account of his thought, i.e. a summing-up from some transcendent, critical position. After all, as I have emphasized repeatedly, Lyotard resists nihilistic religiosity; therefore, it might be objected, building a global interpretation of his thought could be construed as begging e.g. the rational/cognitive question against him.

At least two responses are possible here. First, it does not follow from Lyotard's own methodological commitment – which, as we saw, he does not and cannot justify using rational/cognitive argumentation – that his interpreters must follow him, methodologically speaking. Since I am not a “Lyotardian” – and since, in any case, I think claiming to be one would amount to something of a performative contradiction – this objection can be discarded as question-begging. Paradoxically, one betrays Lyotard both by betraying him, *and* by attempting to be faithful to him; to close oneself off to singularity is, formally speaking, homologous to closing oneself off to universality. To be a disciple to Lyotard is, in other words, to miss the point of a thought which resists discipleship. But this paradox is Lyotard's own, since it is generated by his methodological materialism.

I could also reply, secondly, that an objection to the relative globality of my interpretation, on account of its appearing to be nihilating-religious, is too strong. My interpretation is actually more nuanced than a “terroristic” sublation or final, transcendent account. It is more of an immanent critique. Since I have built it by highlighting a

recurrent problem, rather than trying to show that Lyotard's philosophy, despite appearances, constitutes a coherent system, I have arguably not betrayed outright the spirit of his philosophy by begging the rational/cognitive question; if anything, I have done a paralogical reading of Lyotard, showing one area where his thought appears to repeatedly break down and with respect to which, accordingly, he must invent new moves and new languages to begin again. I most certainly use rational/cognitive tools in constructing this reading, but this should be no more controversial than Lyotard's own use of such tools throughout his career – less so, in fact, since I am agnostic with respect to whether or not his methodology should be adopted.

I would like to think, then, that far from constituting a simple or pernicious betrayal of its subject matter, this dissertation is above all a *productive* betrayal. In the first place, I hope it is no small contribution when considered in terms of the problems usually attendant to grasping Lyotard, who was a notoriously heterogeneous thinker. It is perhaps a fitting tribute to provide an introduction to his thinking which summarizes him by emphasizing the dramatic tensions and incompletenesses to which he was beholden. But taking a page from his methodological materialism, neither do I want to treat Lyotard's thought as dead, or as closed. It remains for me then to assess his legacy, from the angle of the particular problem with respect to which I have chosen to interpret him, but also with particular extrinsic stakes in mind.

In the first following sub-section I will sketch accordingly something of a philosophical balance-sheet with regard to the perspective from which I have interpreted Lyotard's intellectual development. Not surprisingly, perhaps, since Lyotard's development was punctuated by aporia, my assessment will not depart significantly from that trotted out in Chapter 1.1. I will, however, take the opportunity here to enrich this assessment by means of a closer engagement with Habermas, Honneth, and in general the rational-cognitive-communicative types of position which serve as perhaps the best contemporary representatives of a thought at odds with Lyotard's own. By way of rejoinder I will also draw upon Rudolphe Gasché, who advances a more sympathetic contemporary reading. The overall effect of this deeper engagement, in keeping with the arguments of Chapter 1.1, will be to shift the apparent aporia of Lyotard's thought onto the terrain on which he meets his rationalist detractors.

The second sub-section will focus briefly on where a provisionally summed-up Lyotard stands *vis à vis* the question of politics. To me among the most interesting things to be said about “Lyotard today” would concern how, and to what extent, his thoroughgoing methodological materialism and the antihumanism it generates can speak to the *enjeux* and self-understanding of the contemporary anti-capitalist movement. But because by the later period this problem is no longer Lyotard’s own, in assessing him I will take him at his admittedly ironical word when he claims that there is no alternative to political liberalism. It is as an interlocutor in the camp of liberal democracy that I will evaluate him, bearing in mind of course his melancholia with respect to politics in general.

#### **4.1 – Philosophical Assessment**

Based on the assessment I have drawn up in the first three chapters, it might seem that on a very basic level Lyotard’s philosophical project, irrespective of its political implications, is dead in the water. It is perhaps, moreover, a plausible claim that the overall problem I’ve identified, that of formulating an ethical antihumanism, is actually a pseudo-problem. Perhaps it provides a convincing key by which to make sense of Lyotard’s corpus, as I’ve argued; this does not mean however that the problem itself is particularly interesting or important.

Presumably such an objection would be offered on the grounds that Lyotard’s antihumanism is an unnecessary and/or arbitrary theoretical commitment. It is after all generated by his methodological materialism, which as we saw necessarily begs the question against discourses demanding logical and pragmatic consistency. There seems no obvious or compelling reason, then, for the reader to accept or adopt the terms of his antihumanism. Rather, since one could apparently not give a cognitively satisfying meta-methodological justification for it, taking Lyotard’s antihumanist route would appear to be an arbitrary if not logically mistaken gesture. Hence it might fairly be asked why we should trouble ourselves with whether or not his particular brand of antihumanism can be linked onto a horizon of justice and/or whether it can shed light on particular ethical problems.

This is, if we take the terms of his own methodology seriously, one perfectly legitimate response to Lyotard's work – especially given his pagan/postmodern claims about the heterogeneity of discursive regimens and genres, and the (apparently arbitrarily derived) necessity of respecting them. It is unclear, in any case, how he could refute such a response outright. Since at the most basic methodological level he does not hold himself to the criteria of cognitive discourse, Lyotard cannot (and in any case does not) with consistency mount a convincing rational defence of his own methodology. Nor does he settle, for that matter, the very important question of why his particular concerns should be our own. All things considered, it is admittedly difficult not to draw the following conclusion: given the apparent foundering of Western thought on the slaughter benches of the Twentieth Century, Lyotard certainly identified and laboured on a highly relevant problem, namely, justly assessing the claims of the singular in light of the claims of the universal; but, by dint of his philosophical and, perhaps, political rigour – precisely, his uncompromising gesture of “taking the side of the material” – he ended in a sort of *cul-de-sac*. He presents an interesting case of a philosopher who, because he was courageous enough to push a particular line of inquiry as far as he apparently could, brought himself to the edge of an abyss. The particular methodological “error” he made does, after all, appear to be quite basic by cognitive standards.

This apparent error, since it is indeed committed at the methodological level, resonates throughout the higher orders of Lyotard's thinking. As Axel Honneth puts it *a propos* Lyotard's pagan/postmodern political prescriptions,

...because he is not at all able to just ignore the problem of the universal without remainder, Lyotard must in the end become ensnared in the premises of his own thought; the antipathy to universalism forbids a solution to the very problem which he came up against with his demand for an unforced pluralism of social language-games. For, if recourse to universal norms is on principle blocked in the interests of a critique of ideology, then a meaningful argument in support of the equal right to coexistence of all everyday cultures can not be constructed; this excludes the possibility of formulating a rule, let alone of institutionalising a form of law, which, beyond the internal moral perspective of language-games, could take responsibility for the universal recognition of the equal rights of cultures. For how could the equal rights of all language-games be grounded as a moral principle, if at the same time every regulation of social intercourse which goes beyond the norms of specific cultures is to be dispensed with? The theoretical antipathy which guides Lyotard's construction of the *Postmodern* becomes trapped in this aporia, which could equally have served to demonstrate to him that it is not possible to bid farewell to the

universalistic principles of thought of *modernity* as easily as he perceives it to be.<sup>708</sup>

In brief, Honneth considers Lyotard to have failed to derive the proper lesson from his vigorous engagement in the material at hand. If the universal indeed clings to the postmodern as a kind of intractable remainder, and if indeed the postmodern is a thought of the remainder *an sich*, then the postmodern would appear to generate renewed interest in and reflection upon the universal. Viewed another way, the postmodern would appear to be a moment of negativity in the movement of the modern. It is difficult not to see the dialectic at work here, notwithstanding Lyotard's attempts to read the postmodern as altogether *intractable* in its negativity. It should be obvious, at any rate, that at best such intractability lends itself to a kind of spurious infinity of determinate negations. In other words it amounts to neither a total, nor a cumulative, nor a decisive critique of the universal; at best it is an interminable and wolfish circling and nipping at the universal, with no hope of bringing it down.

Consider this problem more concretely, as it is played out in the Lyotard-Habermas debate.<sup>709</sup> To the consternation of Habermas's postmodern or poststructuralist or Nietzschean opponents, the theory of communicative action undercuts any attempt at a radical critique along anti-rationalist, anti-"communicationalist" lines. Recall on this count Lyotard's various statements to the effect that he is not even doing critique; nonetheless, even the most obtuse, literary/rhetorical postmodern positions are (re)formulable in terms of arguments according to Habermas. And though at the formal level, at least, these arguments prove not to be and often even try not to be reasonable and/or assimilable to communicational models of discourse, they nonetheless betray certain underlying pretensions to communicability, rationality, truth and moral correctness by the unavoidable fact of their illocutionary force as speech acts.

For this reason, as Habermas argues in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, the various strategies and theories of the postmodern/poststructuralist/Nietzschean critic ultimately founder on performative auto-

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<sup>708</sup> Honneth, "An Aversion against the Universal. A Commentary on Lyotard's Postmodern Condition", *Theory Culture Society* 1985 2: 147, p.155.

<sup>709</sup> It is understood here that the "debate" in question was largely by proxy; Habermas did not deign to meet Lyotard head on, but among those in his orbit, Frank and Honneth did.

contradiction; the propositional contents of such positions (e.g. “there is no truth”) directly contradict the sense that is implicit in their illocutionary force (e.g. “there is no truth” is at bottom senseless, because it implicitly means that “what I’m telling you [“there is no truth”] is true”). If, as Habermas argues, such normative dimensions of illocutionary force are unavoidable because they are immanent to language/communication itself, then thinkers like Lyotard are at an impasse. To be pragmatically consistent with respect to their propositional contents, they cannot even voice them, since in doing so they would be, by virtue of the illocutionary force of their speech acts, implicitly giving or pointing to a rational account of their theories, or presenting them as true or morally correct. Given this problem, according to Habermas, there seems to be no obvious reason to view postmodern/poststructuralist/Nietzschean theories as viable alternatives to modern theories. Such positions are hamstrung from the outset by the very conditions of their articulation.

One cannot, then, attack Habermas or defend oneself from him wholesale, at least in a head-on manner; as soon as the postmodern/poststructuralist/Nietzschean critic, for instance, enters the argumentative fray with Habermas, she is already playing into his hands. The dissenting voice does have recourse to a less radical, rationalist criticism of the particulars of Habermas’s rationalism. Such can be seen in the debates between Habermas and Apel, Honneth, etc, but also even Lyotard when he employs certain rational/cognitive arguments against the particulars of Habermas’s position (e.g. taking issue with the particular details and emphases of his reading of Kant’s aesthetics). This is not the only option, however. It is also possible to employ against Habermas a non-rational evocation of what escapes communicative action by definition.

But what exactly does this mean? In *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas takes issue with his postmodern/poststructuralist/Nietzschean opponents for championing the “other of reason”.<sup>710</sup> The latter cannot, by definition, be given a rational account; nor can it give a rational account of itself.<sup>711</sup> The other of reason is simply not

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<sup>710</sup> Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 102-103. Recall that the term is also employed (critically) by Descombes.

<sup>711</sup> Ibid.: “Whereas reason is characterized by calculating and manipulation and valorization, its counterpart can only be portrayed negatively ... Self-reflection is sealed off from the other of reason. There reigns a play of forces of a metahistorical or cosmic sort, which calls for an effort of a different observance altogether.”

the stuff of communicative action. But this does not mean that the other of reason does not speak or that it cannot be spoken about – however elliptically or negatively. It simply means that the other of reason (or its witnesses) does (or do) not phrase or sound in such a way that can be positively appropriated by rational discourse such as communicative action. There can be no consensus between humanity and its ghosts; just as, arguably, there can be no consensus about those ghosts on the part of humanity.<sup>712</sup>

So far all of this seems recuperable by Habermas's basic methodological argument. But it bears closer attention, because to the extent that the other of reason speaks at best through the fragmentary and elliptical writings of thinkers like Lyotard, or to the extent that such writers undertake their encounters with the other of reason in a militant, self-conscious spirit of failure, Habermas has begged the question against them. He has largely missed the point by taking them to task for failing to convey, in language, what they know their language or any language fails to convey. As Gasché describes it, *a propos* Habermas's head-on critique of Derrida – but the same could very well be said of his more indirect critique of Lyotard –

[t]he allegation of self-refutation may ... be based on an illegitimate restatement of an adversary's position, but such a charge can also derive from a certain conception of language in which language is reduced to its semantic or differential organization and in which its pragmatic dimension is held to be entirely subservient to the formal structures and semantic organization of language. This is the case in Habermas' notion of language. In Habermas, language is interpreted throughout within the orbit of a conception of the subject as self-consciousness – a subject potentially in control of himself and his language. Thus, the pragmatic dimension of language is reduced to representation. Such a reduction of the pragmatic aspect of language to the mere representation of what it effectuates underlies the charge of self-refutation when the latter is conceived as a *performative* contradiction or as a pragmatic inconsistency.<sup>713</sup>

The problem for Gasché is that,

[i]ndeed, any linguistic operation that is not reducible to the semantic level of language is then taken to be an obstacle to language's representative function. The fundamental asymmetry between what is said and saying as doing is not taken into account when language is understood from a semantic, syntactical, and narrow interpretation of the pragmatic level. A different dimension of doing – which is in

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<sup>712</sup> See especially Lyotard's essay "Something Like: 'Communication ... Without Communication'" in *The Inhuman*.

<sup>713</sup> Gasché, *The Honor of Thinking: Critique, Theory, Philosophy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007, p.328.

excess of everything that is enunciated or expressed – comes to light when doing things with words is understood as presentation rather than representation, that is, when it is seen in terms of the effectuation of an event, for instance, the event of addressing someone. Indeed, in advance to anything it says, all discourse is allocutive.<sup>714</sup>

### Gasché agrees with Lyotard that

[t]he presentation that occurs in the doing of language, or what Emmanuel Levinas calls “Saying,” can never become the object of saying; it can never become what is said. We can see that this “Saying” implies a performative, pragmatic dimension of language, which escapes both speech act theory and the logic of contradiction. To put it differently, the asymmetric irreducibility of the “Saying,” which is constitutive of all acts of speech, causes all acts of utterance to be marked in depth by an inevitable discrepancy. This inconsistency, however, is not one of logical contradiction.<sup>715</sup>

Putting Gasché’s point in Lyotard’s terms – we have seen all of this already – a phrase presents a universe. A universe is a situation of the phrase’s pragmatic poles. A phrase cannot present its own presentation. But its presentation may be situated in the universe of another phrase. There is therefore a dimension of language which is irreducible to representation. It may of course be subject, in a necessarily impoverished way, to representation. This inconsistency here, as Gasché correctly points out, is not a logical contradiction. Lyotard might say that between presentation and representation there is an ontological rather than a logical problem of language.

The gesture rejected by Habermas is precisely that of “taking the side of the material”, of pure presentation. The more rigorous among the postmoderns, poststructuralists or Nietzscheans – and here I would certainly count Lyotard – bear ironic witness to that in and of language which cannot be given a proper account; that which eludes modern/rational discourse but which is somehow uncomfortably close to it. Theirs is a haunted writing, a failed writing, a writing-around the ineffable – and therefore, at its best, a haunting writing. Arguably, their bearing witness is not a totalizing, question-begging leave-taking of modernity as Habermas charges, but rather a simple call to listen for what is forgotten, what goes unheeded, etc.

The issue is whether postmodern thinking falls simply into auto-contradiction and, if it does, whether this is a decisive and fatal flaw. Its thrust is no doubt anti-modern,

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<sup>714</sup> Gasché, *The Honor of Thinking*, p.328.

<sup>715</sup> *Ibid.*, p.328-329.

and it consistently troubles the universal. It is arguable however whether this means that it can be pegged as unsubtly totalizing in character. Viewed one way, to the extent that postmodern bearing-witness fails by the standards of communicative action, nothing more interesting has occurred than what is necessary given the linguistic constraints of thinking and reporting such bearing-witness. In Lyotard's case, at least, the failure is admitted. But this renders his writings, and those of similar thinkers, neither entirely senseless nor useless – in their own way, such thinkers are putting certain deeply important modern themes into perspective by means of allusion to what is uncapturable by modern thought. And this bears emphasis: it is crucial to realize that what postmodernism/poststructuralism/Nietzscheanism cannot reasonably convey also escapes modern rationalism, by definition. It is not as though the ghost is exorcised by modern thought simply by pointing to its intractability from a rational point of view, by employing charges of performative contradiction like so many incantations to drive it away; its very intractability is exactly the point. It is the very reason for its spectrality, which is to say its persistent presence – felt as a resonant and palpable absence, perhaps, but felt nonetheless. It accounts moreover for the methodologically necessary postmodern/poststructuralist/Nietzschean tactic of writing around it.

Habermas would still likely dismiss this kind of talk as, at best, promoting a necessary critical vigilance – and at worst, as acclimatizing readers to a certain obscurantism or a fetishism for that which actually impedes rational thinking and communicative action. Recall that if put on the defensive in this way, one cannot meet Habermas head-on while consistently holding one's own position. But one can shift the focus, albeit rhetorically; one can give voice to that which haunts theories such as Habermas's own in order to show that postmodernism as an enterprise in thought cannot be so easily brushed aside. This appears to be all, but perhaps that is no small thing.

The question here, then, is whether dismissal on the grounds of pragmatic incoherence and methodological arbitrariness is the *only* legitimate response to e.g. Lyotard's work. Based on the preceding reflections, I am inclined to answer in the negative. Though obviously employing the *dispositif* of rational argumentation throughout his corpus and often to great effect, Lyotard's work is largely, perhaps in general even, more of the order of a painting. By this I mean that it is ultimately either

persuasive or it is not, in something like a “gut” sense. By way of illustration, one could very well describe a Rothko or a Pollock or a Newman as “illogical”, or “poorly argued”, but this would profoundly miss the point (if, say, the stakes of a given painting are not to make an argument, but to be an intensity-conductive *dispositif* or a witnessing of the event).

If this way of looking at the matter, i.e. taking his works as an aesthetic economy or an archipelago of such economies, excludes Lyotard from the ranks of “proper” philosophers, then this is perhaps no great concession. As I will mention again in my conclusion, Gualandi has argued that one of the great merits of Lyotard is to have occupied a role whereby the boundary between philosopher and sophist has become highly troubled.<sup>716</sup> The slipperiness of Lyotard as regards belonging to one genre of discourse or another can actually be viewed as an asset, since for one thing it sharpens our thinking and questioning of discursive boundaries. He would thus remain an important figure in philosophy if only for the reason that Zeno, Sextus, Parmenides and others have remained important figures down through the ages: namely, for providing the “rough ground” on which rational/cognitive thinking must tread. Think here of Badiou’s claim, also to be treated in my conclusion, that the philosopher should not exclude the sophist from the city, since he is the partner without whom philosophy would lapse into question-begging, self-justification and terrorism.<sup>717</sup>

Recall also, however, the important point that cognitive discourse itself falls short of delivering a knock-down argument against Lyotard. Bear in mind its inability to outright *refute* his claims as per the methodological priority and over-richness of the material at hand; recall that cognitive discourse can pronounce such claims as at most pragmatically *inconsistent*, or *senseless* but apparently not *false*. To be able to do so, cognitive discourse would have to concede that something definite called “the material at hand” is in fact not too rich to be captured by cognitive discourse. But what exactly would this mean? Would it not imply a definition of “the material at hand” that would beg the question against Lyotard’s own? And how, precisely, could the tractability of the material at hand to cognitive discourse be verified?

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<sup>716</sup> Cf. Gualandi, *Lyotard*.

<sup>717</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1999, p.134-135.

Verification here would seem to amount to proving a negative: namely, that the material at hand is not intractable, as per Lyotard's claim. Since it is not clear how a negative can be proven, it would be necessary to put things in terms, rather, of the material at hand's being tractable. But this would seem to imply that cognitive discourse is to be employed in the proof of its own adequacy *vis à vis* the material at hand. In other words, in order to prove that the material at hand is tractable to cognitive discourse, cognitive discourse would have to appeal to itself, in which case it would be begging the question – unless, of course, it wished to appeal to something outside of itself. But as cognitive discourse itself, barring Apel's controversial advocacy of the possibility of *Letztbegründung*, ultimate grounding, seems intractable to such gestures – Cf. the aforementioned Münchhausen trilemma, Chapter 1, footnote 69 – it is not clear to me what this kind of move would involve.

Ultimately, if indeed the material at hand is too rich to be adequately captured in a transcendent-nihilating schema of any kind – including, let it be said, by any situation of a phrase-presentation whatsoever – then it would be impossible to maintain this without falling into performative contradiction. To reiterate, those of Lyotard's critics who take this angle are right to point this out. But on the other side of the coin, the adequacy of transcendent-nihilating schemas to the material at hand could not be expressed without begging the question. The larger issue, it appears, is that language and thought simply break down here, since they are straining at that which by definition escapes them. Unless we are prepared to concede that there is nothing outside of language and rational thought – and this would be another instance of begging the question, since we would presumably have to appeal to language and rational thought in order to maintain that such was the case – we are left with the sublime sentiment born of reason's demand to imagine what cannot by definition be imagined: precisely, the exact nature of the material at hand.

It appears then that to the end, the basic thrust of Lyotard's project belongs somewhere askance of rational argumentation. It is on the balance evocative and seductive rather than logically compelling, even though he frequently deploys logically compelling and/or plausible arguments. Having followed him through his many gesticulations concerning the material at hand, one might find oneself more sympathetically inclined than the staunch cognitive thinker: perhaps that which Lyotard

cannot with consistency say, but has attempted to show, has in some way resonated with the reader to an extent significant enough to warrant a more charitable attitude. If things are as he suggests, especially as regards “passibility” to the event and the inner “good” inhuman at the heart of human subjectivity, then this is perhaps as it should be. It is plausible that one might trouble herself with Lyotard’s concerns for the combined reasons that they resonate with her, that the rational/cognitive arguments he does provide are compelling (e.g. his penetrating analyses of Kant’s aesthetics), and that the rational/cognitive discourse that dismisses his evocations of the other of reason cannot in any case address them in such a way as to do them justice.

#### **4.2 – Political Assessment**

If it has not been clear to this point, I will state for the record that I count myself among those affected and to some extent compelled by Lyotard’s numerous and heterogeneous evocations of the event (again, this is not to say that I am a “Lyotardian” or that I buy his methodology). The reader should also have gleaned, however, that despite my sympathy, the apparent sterility of Lyotard’s antihumanism for a basically anti-authoritarian Leftist politics is both interesting and highly troubling to me.

The fundamental problem is continuous from the libidinal to the later writings. For methodological reasons, Lyotard is unable to ground the normative claims that are presumably the very stuff of any coherent, anti-authoritarian Leftist politics. Rejecting even a concept of the human around which to consistently organize his normative claims, from at least the libidinal phase to the end, his political engagements are above all wilful and therefore, formally speaking at least, vanguardist. This is to say that despite his occasional participation in and career-long sympathies towards the anti-authoritarian Left, Lyotard’s activism seems gratuitous and his most basic premises are among those shared by both the authoritarian Left and, for that matter, the Right (i.e. appeal in the final analysis to self-evidence and/or power, rather than, for instance, what Habermas often calls the “unforced force” of the better argument). If he were able to ground the moral philosophy of *Le différend*, then things would perhaps be different. Ultimately, however, Lyotard’s political engagements rest on an ungrounded appeal to the self-evidence of the methodological and ethical priority of the event.

It is notable that such theoretical difficulties often play themselves out in the practical sphere as concrete organizational paradoxes. Dogmatically post-Lyotardian (“postmodern” or “difference-centred”) Leftist activism displays two apparently incongruous features: a) the theoretical and practical dissolution of the revolutionary/historical subject into a heterogeneous multiplicity, and b) the advancement of universally binding normative/ethical claims, a speaking in the name of pure multiplicity/heterogeneity. There is much honest and well-meaning activism to be lauded, but the paradox in question often takes the form of self-appointed difference-or-equality-police who, in the bargain, often undercut their own normative claims by claiming that truth is relative.<sup>718</sup>

To be sure, an obvious and perhaps fair response to these concerns of mine, at least as I’ve expressed them, would be “so what”. Though to the very end his sympathies lie with minorities and a kind of theoretical if not immediately practical anti-capitalism, by the end of his career Lyotard has unambiguously denounced any kind of revolutionary perspective: “...aujourd’hui ... le principe d’une alternative radicale (d’un pouvoir ouvrier) à la domination capitaliste *doit* être abandonné” [“...today ... the principle of a radical alternative (a workers’ power) to capitalist domination *must* be abandoned”].<sup>719</sup> By the later writings he even stands up as a cautious interlocutor in and for the sphere of liberal democracy: “...there is no political alternative to liberal democracy, as seems to me from now on to be the case. That’s why I don’t think it’s fair for Rorty or others to authorize themselves to hear resonances of leftism, revolution, or even terrorism, in my defense of the differend”.<sup>720</sup> Charging Lyotard with failure to ground a politics he abandoned would simply take us too far afield of what I am trying to accomplish here. Not only that, it would not exactly be fair; in his theoretical language, doing so would constitute a wrong against his position.

Therefore, rather than make the comparatively weak and arguably pointless argument that a thinker who abandoned revolutionary politics leaves little resources for

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<sup>718</sup> Case in point: I am familiar with an anarchist collective which refused to share commercial space with an activist group of street-involved persons because the latter would not sign an agreement not to use oppressive language in the space. Though well-intentioned, the net result was the exclusion of marginalized persons by a largely white activist group championing marginalized persons.

<sup>719</sup> Lyotard, *La guerre des Algériens*, p.34. NB though this text collects the early Lyotard’s *Socialisme ou barbarie* writings on Algeria, the quote is taken from a prefatory note added in 1989.

<sup>720</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.133 [119].

revolutionary politics, I will restrict the scope of this section and meet the later Lyotard on his own (professed) ground. Since he identifies himself as an interlocutor in the liberal-democratic camp – and in spite of the irony and resignation that seem to drip from this concession<sup>721</sup> – I will presently evaluate him as one.

What then, overall, can Lyotard’s antihumanism possibly contribute to the discourse of a nominally humanist<sup>722</sup> liberal democracy? A good answer can be gleaned from his rebuttal to Richard Rorty in “A Bizarre Partner” (in *Postmodern Fables*). *A propos* Lyotard, Rorty maintains that “our French colleagues are too eager to find or create a linguistic island and to invite people to dwell there, and not enough interested in building bridges between these islands and the mainland”.<sup>723</sup> One implication of this charge is that French thought – read, poststructuralism, la pensée ’68 – emphasizes difference and singularity at the expense of communication and solidarity. This is of course true. But Lyotard replies that “...the principle ... that discussion is always possible comes up against a problem. This problem in no way derives from the heterogeneity of untranslatable idioms, be they individual or cultural, but it resides in the irreducibility of one genre of discourse to another, be it within the discourse of a single speaker or between two interlocutors speaking the same language”.<sup>724</sup> Different genre-determined stakes, as we saw in Chapter 2, render discussion agonistic and, as Lyotard wishes to suggest, fundamentally resistant to the very idea of a wrong-free or terror-free consensus.

Lyotard’s fundamental criticism of political liberalism, a genre to which he claims there is no obvious preferable alternative, is that it transforms differends into litigations:

It declares that it is a good thing for the other to respond and for the discussion to be engaged. In the absence of your interlocution, your partner continuing to play his/her game and you yours, you will not be able to play together. I agree with this. In exploring the nature of the game that you and your partner intend to play, you situate this game as a reference to your discussion ... Litigation replaces your differend,

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<sup>721</sup> In fabular mode, Lyotard elsewhere speculates that liberal democracy is a moment in the development of the inhuman technoscientific system – i.e. a sub-system favoured for its flexibility. Thus his claim that liberal democracy has no alternative is not exactly a ringing endorsement. (Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.89-90 [84-85].)

<sup>722</sup> Lyotard’s claim about liberal democracy *vis à vis* the development of technoscience is that its humanism is epiphenomenal – think here of primary process dissimulated in/as secondary accretion.

<sup>723</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p.124 [112].

<sup>724</sup> *Ibid.*, p.131-132 [118].

and you are able to come to an agreement about the way to proceed.  
But it remains to be proved that it is always *better* to play together.<sup>725</sup>

Political liberalism, in other words, is expedient and presumably, for Lyotard, the most preferable political system to the extent that it a) facilitates the playing of games between partners, one among which is of course communication, and b) is relatively flexible, open-ended, does not (in theory!) resort to terror (where doing so is to impose silence, “to deprive the other of the ability to respond to that deprivation”).<sup>726</sup> Political liberalism facilitates play, however, at the expense of the differend. It is not obvious to Lyotard that it is always preferable to do this. In fact, he suspects that doing so might frustrate the discovery “of many things”,<sup>727</sup> the unexpected products of lone and/or unconventional workings-through by those especially passible to the event. There is a kind of intimacy that liberal democracy continuously risks papering over in its very attempt to establish communication – think not only of the inhuman love and solidarity between subjects Lyotard detects in the writings of Malraux, but also of those divisions internal to the so-called individual itself, the haunting of the subject by its own infancy, the “bizarre partner”.

Lyotard’s postmodern and later antihumanism, which as we saw was largely expressed in terms of his critique of the Kantian faculty subject, rears its head here. He questions the status of the very “individuals” among whom political liberalism may facilitate – that is, those entities whose own hesitations or contradictions can putatively “be solved by an inner debate”.<sup>728</sup> There is “no reason a priori to eliminate the other case, which is that of a differend between intimate partners”,<sup>729</sup> between the islands of the inner archipelago. The problem for liberal democracy is that even discussing the “bizarre [internal] partner”

...eliminates that other a priori since it is [as subject of discussion] not an interlocutor. The discussion can only admit it as a third person, as that about which we discuss. This is what I call placing between quotation marks. We *cite* that other to come forward (*comparaître*). But, at the very moment we are dealing with that other, in writing or in thinking, it in no way *comes forth* (*comparaître*): it barely even *shows*

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<sup>725</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.143-144 [128].

<sup>726</sup> *Ibid.*, p.210 [179].

<sup>727</sup> *Ibid.*, p.144 [128].

<sup>728</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>729</sup> *Ibid.*

*forth (paraît)* and is barely even in our *company (compagnie)*. How can we be liberal democrats with such an other?<sup>730</sup>

What Lyotard can be said to have contributed to liberal democratic philosophical debates by means of his antihumanist response to Rorty (as well as to Habermas, Apel and others) is not negligible. For one thing, he questions whether the flourishing of difference, singularity, and idiosyncrasy may not hold an important or even pre-eminent place alongside communication and consensus in political liberalism (note that on this count the argument in “A Bizarre Partner” seems in certain respects to represent an uncharacteristic concession to communication and consensus on Lyotard’s part). Also, to the extent that liberal democracy presupposes stereotypical rational-deliberative individuals, psychically well-formed and for that matter, apparently physically healthy, Lyotard’s argument points out that it is possible that it tends to ignore the potential significance of certain differences (gender, ability, mental health, etc) as well as certain inner, more intimate out-and-out intractabilities. It is hard, in other words, to square political liberalism with his paralogy of the human; perhaps, however, this is a good thing at least to the extent that a rigorous anthro-paralogy serves to frustrate the slide of liberalism into positivism and terror.

Lyotard’s virtue here is in acting as a sceptical voice, troubling deliberative models and putting difference – even “intimate” i.e. internal differences – squarely on the agenda. Note however that liberal thinkers such as Martha Nussbaum can also be said to fall into this orbit, insofar as they attempt to, for instance, gender the individual of liberal theory.<sup>731</sup> Moreover, Nussbaum’s liberalism, unlike Lyotard’s, allows her to formulate positive political prescriptions and firmly commit to practical projects.

Where Lyotard’s contribution fails or perhaps overshoots is in his ultimately ungrounded elevation of difference over whatever tools there may be – communicational-rational or otherwise – with which to form chains or networks of communication, consensus and solidarity. If Honneth’s assessment is correct, Lyotard simply misunderstands communicative reason as a difference-nihilating endeavour, failing to

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<sup>730</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.146 [130].

<sup>731</sup> Cf. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2000.

realize its potential to take difference into account on the balance of its ultimate goals.<sup>732</sup> Lyotard seems to take this possibility into account at the end of “A Bizarre Partner”, but defers ultimately to the (for him, and basically unargued) wiser-seeming watching-over of the archipelago of heterogeneous games or genres.<sup>733</sup>

I also remain unconvinced that Lyotard’s late concession to political liberalism, cautious, critical and ironical as it is, escapes to any extent the general normative problem generated by his methodology. For obvious reasons, he continues to beg the question whenever he takes a stance on a particular political issue. Plus, even granting the prescriptive force of his philosophy of the differend one must conclude that is of an ultimately divisive/paralyzing rather than facilitating/unifying character. The first problem pertains to the methodological constraints on advancing his political positions as plausible arguments; the second pertains to whether or not he can prescribe anything for practical democratic politics other than either a) some postmodern, “tolerant” form of apartheid, or b) strong state-sponsored multiculturalism, such as one finds in Canada, complete with all its paradoxes.

This two-pronged difficulty does not appear to be generated, strictly speaking, by Lyotard’s argument in “A Bizarre Partner”. He seems to acknowledge there to some extent the basic paradox of his position, hence his going no further than leaving the door open, at least, for liberal democracy. The latter is a genre of linkage among others, and apparently it is, at the very least, no worse than others. It appears to be even better, to some extent, for aforementioned reasons – but here Lyotard cannot ground what he is saying, methodologically speaking. The theoretical difficulty pertaining to politics is therefore generated at the methodological level. But practically speaking, if we choose to take Lyotard’s methodological materialism seriously, as he still seems to do in the later part of his career, then he also runs into a major dilemma.

By way of demonstrating how this works, take two contemporary political phenomena. Both pose problems for the later Lyotard’s professed concession to liberalism, underscoring, in the bargain, how the radical as well as more “respectable” mainstream Right increasingly and somewhat successfully frames its separatist

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<sup>732</sup> Honneth, “An Aversion against the Universal. A Commentary on Lyotard’s Postmodern Condition”, p.154.

<sup>733</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.147 [130].

philosophy in the very language of postmodern tolerance of singularity and difference which is so often championed by the post-Lyotardian Left. The phenomena I will consider are a) appeals to “white pride” and “reverse racism”, the preservation of white culture, traditions, and privileges in order to mask the less palatable demands of “white power”; b) the attack on gay marriage on the grounds of the supposed right to not have the definition and the institution of marriage changed “for the rest of us”.

I should state at the outset that I consider “white pride” and attempts to block gay marriage *prima facie* repugnant. Moreover, it is my position that they can and should be mercilessly critiqued. As far as I can tell, Lyotard would agree with these statements; certainly, both phenomena display a logic that his pagan/postmodern pragmatic philosophy would read as unjust. But ultimately, and here is where I part ways with him, on account of his methodology, Lyotard could only mount this critique on question-begging grounds. His philosophy of difference may be fairly viewed as morally agnostic about such phenomena on a very basic level. More troubling still, Lyotard’s position might even be said to lend them a certain amount of credence.

This claim, which should be carefully distinguished from the claim that Lyotard adopts such positions or is politically repugnant on purpose, speaks to how very far his later philosophy seems to have taken him from the revolutionary orbit. As Rorty points out *a propos* the Habermas-Lyotard debate, in a certain sense Habermas can claim that thinkers such as Lyotard are *de facto* “neoconservative” since “they offer us no ‘theoretical’ reason to move in one social direction rather than another”.<sup>734</sup> One reason for this apparent conservatism, coming as it does from an unexpected source, is the uncompromising search for

something that will make possible “authentic criticism”. Lyotard unfortunately retains [thereby] of one the left’s silliest ideas – that escaping from [the rules and practices and] institutions [which have been transmitted to the intellectual] is automatically a good thing, because it ensures that one will not be ‘used’ by the evil forces which have ‘co-opted’ these institutions. Leftism of this sort necessarily devalues consensus and communication, for insofar as the intellectual remains able to talk to people outside the avant-garde he “compromises” himself... [O]ne should see the quest for the sublime, the attempt (in Lyotard’s words) to “present the fact that the

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<sup>734</sup> Rorty, “Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity”, in Taylor and Lambert (eds.), *Jean-François Lyotard: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory Volume II: Politics and History of Philosophy*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p.361.

unpresentable exists” ... as one of the prettier unforced blue flowers of bourgeois culture. But this quest is wildly irrelevant to the attempt at communicative consensus which is the vital force that drives that culture.<sup>735</sup>

This “wild irrelevance” of Lyotard’s theoretical operations to the attempt at communicative consensus will of course be granted, unless one welcomes them as providing a healthy dose of scepticism. The stronger claim here is that Lyotard’s works are thereby unusable as regards the most basic workings of liberal democracy. This plays itself out in very practical terms as a kind of political paralysis, a vacillation between the two troubling aforementioned political options of tolerant apartheid and strong state intervention. Certainly, in Lyotard’s terms both “white pride” and the anti-gay-marriage position appear to commit pragmatic wrongs and nihilate difference.<sup>736</sup> But what guidance could Lyotard’s position furnish for actually critiquing and subsequently dealing with them in practical terms?

Recall that Lyotard does not, in *Le différend*, succeed in demonstrating that the ethical genre is determinant between genres in the last instance. On the pragmatic battlefield, which Lyotard depicts as radically heterogeneous and disperse, out-and-out racism and homophobia as kinds of discursive genre meet differend-ethics as simply yet another genre. Not only Lyotard’s methodology but the differend-ethical genre *itself* dictates that it may not trump the other genres – this in spite of the fact that doing so describes its very stakes. Further, this means that we must hesitate to condemn the difference-nihilating contents of both undesirable positions on the grounds that by doing so we risk failing to bear witness to a differend between those genres and our own, thereby perpetrating a wrong. In the last instance, using Lyotard’s methodology with consistency we could not argue our way out of according a significant amount of

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<sup>735</sup> Rorty, “Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity”, p.363-364.

<sup>736</sup> E.g. “We whites are only defending ourselves against those (e.g. African Americans and immigrants) who are wronging us via affirmative action and the threat they represent to our ways of life” (thereby failing to admit historical culpability and the question of reparations into the argument, and failing to admit that the burden of proof is already in fact against those who do not fit into the WASP way of life); “Those of us who do not want gay marriage are just defending our way of life, preserving the definition of an institution against those who would change and thereby destroy it” (thereby disqualifying gay marriage from being marriage at the outset, but further ruling out the possibility that the expansion of a concept is not necessarily tantamount to its destruction in theory or “for the rest of us”).

breathing-room and even respect to such positions. If we truly wanted to combat them we would have to appeal to some other methodology, and/or naked political power.

Let us look at this dilemma more closely still. Lyotard's position would seem to imply that, for example, racist and homophobic WASP life-worlds be allowed to flourish independently of nihilating-religious frameworks that would deign to work them over into respectful, liberal ones. Such a thing would imply the transformation of a differend into a litigation, hence the perpetration of a wrong. Things are not, however, so simple. It would appear, rather, that on Lyotard's reading such narrow life-worlds are *both* unjust (i.e. they are themselves nihilating-religious) *as well as* potential victims of liberal injustice (i.e. to the extent that they are singular, they should not be submitted to nihilating-religious operations).

Practically speaking, on one hand Lyotard's concession to political liberalism would appear to recommend nothing else than a form of separatism: a political/demographic/pragmatic situation where groups do not encroach upon one another; "separate but equal", perhaps – in any case, a fundamentally "neoconservative" solution in the sense meant by Habermas. Recall his pagan injunction for a multiplicity of justices and a justice of multiplicity, to let language games be in their purity and their dispersion. Doing so, cashed out in practical terms with respect to different forms of life, looks very much like a "tolerant" form of apartheid. It remains to be argued how this kind of arrangement could possibly fit within a liberal democratic framework.

But consider also that the cultures of the groups in question might very well contain as norms the colonization or assimilation or destruction of other groups. On Lyotard's model the encroachment of these groups on each other would be unacceptable on account of violating the justice of multiplicity. Practically speaking, it would seem to necessitate the intervention of a strong state to prevent such forced passages; something like Lyotard's faculty of judgment, but with political/executive power. Such a state would no doubt only replicate the wrong it sought to redress at a higher level, however, since by arbitrating between the two groups it would transform a differend into a litigation,

thereby wronging one or both parties.<sup>737</sup> Recall that for Lyotard, “it remains to be proved that it is always *better* to play together”.<sup>738</sup> Surely, however, even a minimally liberalizing “cultural translation”<sup>739</sup> between life-worlds would be preferable to letting racist/homophobic life-worlds flourish? It does not appear however that Lyotard could make such a claim with consistency.

Taken together, this means that if he wishes to evade the charge that his position amounts to a sophisticated defence of some form or other of postmodern apartheid, then Lyotard is caught squarely in the fundamental paradox of official multiculturalism – that is, encouraging difference but appealing in the last instance to naked power in order to force heterogeneous groups to get along. In short, he is caught between an extreme and untenable conservatism/relativism on the one hand, and a form of liberal authoritarianism on the other. Since neither of these positions would appear to be just on his view, but since they also seem to exhaust what can be expected from his resigned entry into the liberal-democratic camp, Lyotard’s evacuation of the radical camp does not appear to have been particularly fruitful.

As a strictly political/rhetorical act Lyotard is certainly welcome to rail against cases of difference that do not respect difference. What troubles me is that in assessing Lyotard as a political philosopher, rather than as simply a rhetorician/politician, he has apparently given very little to liberal democratic politics apart from injecting it with a dose of scepticism. Granting the enduring value of scepticism in political life (see my conclusion), it is not obvious that he gives much of anything else by way of advancing or even sustaining liberal democratic politics in theory or practice. Rather, when he does appear liberal and not simply conservative and/or relativist, he appears to have absorbed the defining paradox of liberal multiculturalism in his own political position – being unwilling and methodologically unable, however, unlike, say, Habermas, Apel and Honneth, to attempt even a partial remedy.

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<sup>737</sup> Recall Lyotard’s claims in *The Differend* that the state of Israel transforms a differend into a litigation. It is not obvious how any state could avoid doing the same; think here of Canadian attempts to redress the wrongs of Residential Schools.

<sup>738</sup> Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, p.144 [128].

<sup>739</sup> The term is Judith Butler’s. Butler offers an interesting counterpoint to Lyotard here, in advocating for a kind of translation which “*will compel each language to change in order to apprehend the other*” (*Undoing Gender*, New York, Routledge, 2004, p.38. Italics in original.).

In sum, then, by deepening the critical thread running through the first three chapters, I have suggested two things in this chapter:

a) Assessed on grounds of rational argumentation, Lyotard is basically incoherent. At best, since he speaks of things outside of the orbit of rational argumentation, the question of his philosophical merits is undecidable. He might be on to something, but this is better shown, or evoked, than strictly argued. Therefore on the balance it appears undesirable to take up a Lyotardian position; one could say however that his thought is highly engaging, troubling and enriching in certain respects.

b) Assessed for his contributions to political liberalism, Lyotard is similarly incoherent, and does not appear to offer anything positive. At best, he has served as a sceptical and difference-defending voice in the camp of liberal democracy, encouraging vigilance and a critical stance with regard to such concepts as the human and the liberal-democratic individual. He seems however hamstrung from the outset, unable to ground prescriptive claims or navigate a way out of the paradoxes of liberal multiculturalism.

## **Conclusion:**

### Lyotard's Enduring Value

To summarize the argument that has been made thus far:

At the most general level of analysis, Lyotard espoused a methodological materialism which proved logically/pragmatically indefensible (but not obviously refutable). This methodology generated (logically speaking) Lyotard's antihumanism: that is, his rejection, on the one hand, of any and all systems of thought placing the human as such in the conceptual and/or ethical centre of the universe and/or history, and, on the other, variations of the anthropological/phenomenological/Kantian subject that would occupy that place *grosso modo* in modern philosophy. Lyotard's antihumanist tendencies came to a head during the libidinal phase of his thought, and proved highly problematic for ethical reasons. On the one hand, on account of his methodology, Lyotard found himself unable to ground normative claims in logical arguments. On the other hand, on account of his antihumanism, he found himself with neither an individual nor a collective human subject of ethics to defend.

As I have reconstructed it, Lyotard's work since at least the aporia of *Économie libidinale* was by and large an attempt to square the demands of ethics with his thoroughgoing antihumanism. I show that while along the way he produced much insightful commentary on philosophy, aesthetics, politics, and so on, Lyotard never managed to provide a satisfactory account of his normative claims and assumptions from within a methodologically materialist and hence antihumanist position. Unable to do so for reasons intrinsic to his methodology, Lyotard turned in his later works to an additive strategy of accumulating anthro-paralogical evidence. He ceased by and large to defend his normative claims and turned instead to gathering evidence that the human, or something within it and at odds with it, intrinsically resists injustices.

This overview set the stage for my more refined two-part critical assessment. *First*, though Lyotard's project can be fairly called unfinished on account of his having died while actively pursuing philosophy, his having shifted to an additive strategy seems to indicate that his thought had become something of a spurious infinity of determinate negations. Philosophically speaking, his thought in general leaves us with the impression of a fundamental incoherence. But it is plausible to interpret his later works – perhaps all

of his works – as strategic rather than strictly speaking philosophical, insofar as it appears that he is seeking above all to create political effects. This however led to the *second* prong of my critique, which was to show that in terms of politics Lyotard's strategy yields very little. In itself, refined literary interventions sceptical of solidarity politics are an extremely minimal and perhaps misguided tactic; applied to activist and liberal-democratic contexts, moreover, Lyotard's paradoxes resonate as impasses in deliberation and policy-making. It appears therefore that his political legacy is largely one of irony, paralysis and melancholy. Despite the fact that his arguments are of universal import, putting him in the context of the history of twentieth century French thought at various points throughout my argument helped to obliquely suggest that Lyotard is also interesting as a symptom – that is, that his thought as a whole is perhaps best read in context and of itself does not so much provide a worthy philosophical position as a lesson in the sociology of knowledge and the fruits of certain strands of radical thinking.

Having thus critiqued Lyotard, it remains to see what, if anything, remains to be said in his favour. It is my view that in spite of the critical assessment provided in the previous chapter, Lyotard remains a valuable thinker in certain respects. This he is in four primary ways, all of which are linked to pedagogy. In no particular order:

- a) Lyotard may be valued as a kind of moral educator.
- b) He may also be valued as a sophist, in the sense of having been an indispensable discourse partner to the rational philosopher and a figure against which the boundaries and tools of rational philosophy must be constantly tested.
- c) To engage seriously with Lyotard is to broaden one's knowledge base considerably since it entails a sustained study of his philosophical forebears and contemporaries, as well as familiarity with a variety of outlying figures and subjects.
- d) Finally, his work may be praised for extolling the eternal value of scepticism in a world where there is, at times, too much rather than not enough belief.

### a) Lyotard as moral educator

The notion of “Lyotard as moral educator” is taken from A.T. Nuyen’s article of the same name.<sup>740</sup> While I obviously disagree with Nuyen that “Lyotard has a coherent ethics,”<sup>741</sup> or that he “shows us how to answer the normative question, ‘why should I be moral?’”,<sup>742</sup> I do agree that “Lyotard, first, teaches us to identify the moral problem, or the ethical question, of the postmodern condition, [and] second, gives us lessons in moral pragmatics”.<sup>743</sup> In short, Lyotard inculcates a certain familiarity with meta-ethical and context-specific ethical questions, and/or a disposition in the reader to respond to them.

In the first place, a sustained study of Lyotard requires the ability to read closely (see point c) below). Close reading requires to a certain extent a suspension of judgment. The rigour of reading Lyotard (but this could be said of any philosopher) inculcates the virtues of patience, charity and openness to difference. The extent to which Lyotard constantly shifts gears and tries the patience of his reader may arguably make his work a better than average testing ground for the inculcation of these virtues. There is a kind of collusion of form and content in the works of Lyotard, since one must suspend judgment to some extent in thinking through his peregrinations around the problem of judgment.

Less formalistically, Lyotard drives home in his pagan and postmodern works especially the question of doing justice where singularity and difference are concerned. Though his methodology may render his arguments ultimately incoherent, reading him turns one on to the subtle ways in which differences are constantly papered over by totalizing thinking. Content-wise, then, Lyotard teaches his readers to lend an ear to that which struggles to make itself heard. If it is taken on faith that this kind of sensitivity is a moral virtue (since again, it is not clear how he can coherently defend singularity and difference as such), then the post-libidinal Lyotard (at least)<sup>744</sup> is an excellent moral educator in this respect. Through form and content he teaches the value and inculcates the virtues of patience, charity, and openness to difference.

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<sup>740</sup> In Taylor and Lambert (eds.), *Jean-François Lyotard: Critical evaluations in Cultural Theory Volume III: Ethics*, London and New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 295-308.

<sup>741</sup> *Ibid.*, p.307.

<sup>742</sup> *Ibid.*, p.295.

<sup>743</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>744</sup> In *Lyotard and the Political*, Williams analyzes the libidinal Lyotard’s ethos of “active passivity” in similarly favourable terms.

## b) Lyotard as sophist

In his first *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Badiou rejects Lyotard's definition of philosophy as a search for its own rules.<sup>745</sup> Claiming a different definition of philosophy (which I will not treat here for reasons of scope and relevance), Badiou puts Lyotard in the position of the sophistic dialogue partner. He argues moreover that philosophy must in general continuously test itself against similar figures, such as Nietzsche and Wittgenstein.<sup>746</sup> The expulsion of the sophist from dialogue, from politics, from the ideal city is itself a kind of abnegation of the duty and rigour of philosophical thinking, not to mention its "ethics"; accordingly, for Badiou there is an immense value even in Lyotard's "anti-philosophy":<sup>747</sup>

The ethics of philosophy is basically to maintain the sophist as its adversary, to preserve *polemos*, dialectical strife. The disastrous moment is the one where philosophy declares the sophist *must* not be, the moment when it decrees the annihilation of its Other ... The sophist is required at all times for philosophy to maintain its ethics.<sup>748</sup>

Similarly, Gualandi's thesis in his *Lyotard* is that Lyotard may be interpreted as a figure constantly troubling the very boundary between sophistry and philosophy. Constantly shifting as we saw from rational argumentation to rhetorical appeal and back again, Lyotard's thinking of discursive boundaries demonstrates another confluence of form and content. To think with Lyotard is to constantly shift gears. It is to constantly question what is proper or pertinent to genres of linkage; it is ultimately to question the nature of philosophy, as well as its role in judging over discursive passages.

Judging from these interpretations, one of Lyotard's enduring values may lie in the extent to which he constantly keeps the question of philosophy itself on the agenda. Since he so freely blends genres, employing rational argumentation quite liberally but not holding it up as a supreme value, a reading of Lyotard immediately poses the question of what counts as philosophy. There is thus a certain meta-philosophical value in studying

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<sup>745</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p.66.

<sup>746</sup> *Ibid.*, p.137.

<sup>747</sup> For Badiou's take on Lyotard more generally, see his elegy in *Pocket Pantheon*, London and New York, Verso, 2009.

<sup>748</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p.134.

him. As Badiou reminds us, Platonic philosophy was hammered out in dialogue with a host of anti-philosophers.<sup>749</sup>

### **c) Lyotard as historian of philosophy / commentator on contemporary philosophy**

Lyotard's readings in the history of philosophy are highly contentious; since he is a "strategic plunderer", one must not take for granted that his version of Kant, for instance, is *the* version of Kant to adopt. Moreover, Lyotard's analyses of his contemporaries are not without controversy either; see on this count Rorty's persuasive argument that Lyotard's understanding of contemporary scientific practice is off-base,<sup>750</sup> and Honneth's claims that he plain and simply gets Kuhn/Feyerabend and Habermas/Apel wrong.<sup>751</sup>

I am not suggesting that Lyotard fabricates or is incompetent in his historical or contemporary readings. His analyses of Kant, for example, are penetrating and raise questions of major philosophical importance. I make rather the weaker claim that as a self-avowed strategic/political reader of philosophy, who in addition routinely stirs up controversy with his interpretations, Lyotard should be approached with caution.

Arguably, his primary value as historian and commentator is in the sheer scope and heterogeneity of his engagements. Focusing on philosophy alone, to get a good grasp of what Lyotard is saying and doing requires some familiarity, and in some cases rather close familiarity, with Marx, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Freud, Nietzsche, Hegel, Aristotle, Plato, Levinas, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kant, Adorno, Augustine and others. The fact that Lyotard is almost always polemicizing and commenting on contemporaries to some extent requires that one also get a handle on Althusser, Lacan, Deleuze/Guattari, Derrida, Apel, Habermas, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Rorty, the "nouveaux philosophes" and others. Moreover, the fact that he constantly seeks out intersections, blurrings and boundary disputes of philosophy with literature and fine arts further encourages familiarity with

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<sup>749</sup> "In the truly philosophical dialogues, Plato *rebutts* the sophists ... But the dialectic always includes what the sophist is saying. In Book X of the *Laws*, Plato resorts to *debarring* the sophist by the somber knotted scheming ecstasy, the sacred and terror. Plato then gives up on the ethics of philosophy and exposes the whole of his thinking to disaster." (Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, p.134.) For Lyotard's take on the Socratic dialectic, see the Plato notice in *Le différend*.

<sup>750</sup> Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity", p.353-354.

<sup>751</sup> Honneth, "An Aversion against the Universal. A Commentary on Lyotard's Postmodern Condition", p.153/154.

Cézanne, Malraux, Cage, Newman, Adami, Joyce, Butor, Adami, Francken, and others. Considering finally that Lyotard is always very much *au courant* in French and international politics (save, it would often appear post-Algerian writings, in the global south), the reading of Lyotard encourages some amount of historical, sociological and political putting-in-context.

The experience of reading Lyotard thus carries with it another important pedagogical value: the dictates of philosophical rigour applied to his corpus require the attainment of a wide breadth of philosophical knowledge, in addition to knowledge of several other subject matters. Speaking from experience, the writing of this document has proven to be of immense value to me as a philosopher. It has given me a wide beginning on which to build further.

#### **d) Lyotard as sceptic**

Closely related to Lyotard's value as historian of philosophy and commentator on his contemporaries is his value as a sceptical voice. For every transition in Kant or Hegel that seems a little too easy, the Lyotardian voice cries "slight-of-hand" or "differend", or "terror". It is arguable, for instance, whether the study of Kant will ever be the same after Lyotard's intervention – and recall that the substance of said intervention was to deeply trouble Kantian philosophy from within. More generally, to read Lyotard as a reader of other philosophers is to acclimatize oneself to the virtue of close and critical reading. A good sign that one has learned Lyotard's sceptical lesson as regards philosophical texts and arguments, in my view, is that one can turn this scepticism on Lyotard himself. Hence my aforementioned belief that in "betraying" Lyotard through criticism I am actually doing better than those who equally betray him through relatively uncritical reading.

The lesson of Lyotard's scepticism may also be said to have a wider relevance, however. Scepticism as a social fact can be but is not necessarily an evil; Lyotard himself notes the ambiguity of the sociological postmodern condition, where the collapse of grand narratives heralds the possibility of a new terror based on instrumental rationality on the one hand, but also a creative-anarchical flowering of locally determined language games on the other. In any case, while conservatives continue to decry the pervasive

“relativism” and “nihilism” of our times, the erosion of virtue and family values, etc, it is less often noted that people in post-industrial societies hold tenaciously to what beliefs they actually do have – specifically, the largely tacit belief in flexible, post-Fordist capitalism as the Real, the unquestionable background condition, of their lives. Echoing the arguments of Slavoj Žižek,<sup>752</sup> it is not the lack of belief of our contemporaries that is the problem, but rather the pervasive and persistent belief that the world as we find it works, that it will not end in environmental and social catastrophe, and that everything will turn out for the best. Lyotard’s work is of value in the sense that it encourages a mindset sensitive to the rooting-out of such problematic and potentially deadly pre-suppositions.

The question remains unanswered by Lyotard, however, as to how one is actually supposed to live with one’s scepticism. Perhaps it is fair to view *Signé Malraux* as an attempt to broach this question, but nowhere does Lyotard explicitly tell us how exactly we are supposed to overcome the vertigo of nihilism and, *pace* Nietzsche, steel ourselves for mythopoesis, the joyful creation of new values.

If I have been successful in this document, then I will have demonstrated three things to the reader:

- a) that Lyotard’s work may be plausibly interpreted as an attempt to square ethics and the question of justice with an antihumanist philosophy;
- b) that he did not and could not ultimately ground ethics from within an antihumanist position, foundering instead for reasons logical and strategic;
- c) that his work is nonetheless a worthy subject of study because it has moral-pedagogical value, sophisticated-pedagogical value, philosophical-pedagogical value, and finally, sceptical-pedagogical value.

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<sup>752</sup> This basic line of argument runs through much of Žižek’s work. *Living in the End Times*, London and New York, Verso, 2010, constitutes an extended discussion of what getting beyond liberal democratic ideology might look like.

In broader brushstrokes, to return to the claims of the Introduction, my contribution to philosophical research is:

- a) to have added precision, detail and depth to the story of the radical generation of French philosophers of the 1960s and 70s by focusing on the arguments and intellectual development of one of its key figures, being in the bargain the first to have interpreted Lyotard in a systematic way via the general-particular problem set of “wild” normativity and ethical antihumanism, and
- b) to have employed Lyotard as a guide in thinking through the latter philosophically interesting problem set itself.

I will be happy if the reader walks away with a deeper appreciation of Lyotard and an enriched understanding of certain themes and problems of meta-ethics. Above all it should be clear that Lyotard cuts a paradoxical figure – a thinker who does not so much succeed in his own thinking as he does in teaching others how to think.

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