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**Above All, Shut Up:  
A Study of Lyotard's Ethical Genre**

**John Zachariah**

**A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
Communication Studies**

**Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

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## ABSTRACT

### Above All, Shut Up: A Study of Lyotard's Ethical Genre

John Zachariah

A common critical evaluation of Jean-François Lyotard's work is that it is concerned to find new ways of speaking, or of expression. This thesis argues that Lyotard's work, particularly *Just Gaming* and *The Differend*, is concerned with finding new ways to listen. Those motifs are considered that relate or contribute to Lyotard's elaboration, in *The Differend*, of the ethical genre of discourse, in which one is compelled to listen. A critique is offered of this genre as Lyotard presents it. Another genre, poetry, is suggested as more suited to the demands that Lyotard, following the work of Levinas, makes of an ethical genre. The relevance that such an ethical genre might have to media studies is discussed.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### i: Rorty's Distinction

In his essay "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," Richard Rorty argues that Continental philosophy needs to be overhauled and revitalized; it must become more relevant, pragmatic and sensible. He suggests that "one might see the canonical sequence of philosophers from Descartes to Nietzsche as a distraction from the history of concrete social engineering which made contemporary North Atlantic culture what it is now."<sup>12</sup> In Rorty's view, philosophy since Descartes has not provided a conceptual base upon which to build the societies of the west. Philosophy is not the master script of modern history, nor is it the source or guarantor of every disposition, attitude and opinion one encounters. Rorty views modern philosophers as self-absorbed artists toiling away on some useless idol while the real work of making roads, bridges, schools and decisions is done elsewhere, by people who have never read Kant or Hegel or Nietzsche. He maintains that the relationship between modern philosophy and the course of the "democratic societies" is at best analogical, and wants to deflate the pretensions of Continental philosophers who think they are writing and refining stage directions for the rest of us.

Into the context of an exhausted Continental philosophy, Rorty introduces the two main subjects of his essay: Habermas, who defends the incomplete project of modernity, and Lyotard, who lobbies for postmodernity. Rorty has trouble with both philosophers. He thinks that Lyotard is incapable of choosing between, or even

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), pp.173.

the liberal subject and its ability to make informed choices. Lyotard is chided for his remoteness, for his distance from the troubles of everyday life, and for his retreat into the cold splendour of theory, a retreat marked by a "contempt for the 'philosophy of subjectivity'" which requires Lyotard to "abstain from anything that smacks of the 'metanarrative of emancipation'."<sup>13</sup> Lyotard is extreme in his thinking: Rorty applauds the suspicion under which he places the narratives of modernity, but excoriates Lyotard's refusal of the possibilities that those metanarratives were supposed to nourish and protect: justice, fairness and decency.

If Rorty thinks that Lyotard runs ahead too far of modern philosophy, he thinks the opposite of Habermas: the German philosopher is too strongly yoked to philosophy's past. Rorty believes that Habermas takes Kant's separation of the faculties (which Rorty calls Kant's "'three-sphere' picture of culture") too seriously. He argues that "once [Hegel and Habermas] swallow Kant's 'stubborn differentiation', then they are condemned to an endless series of reductionist and antireductionist moves."<sup>14</sup> The "modern" philosopher refuses to let Kant's separate spheres coexist, but also refuses to reduce any two of them to the other remaining one.

By accepting Kant's distinction of reasons, says Rorty, Habermas assumes that the "real" world corresponds to these distinctions; that is, he assumes "that the story of

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<sup>13</sup> Rorty, p.172.

<sup>14</sup> Rorty, p.167.

the re-alignment, assimilation, and expansion of the three 'value-spheres' is essential to the story of the *Selbstvergewisserung* or modern society, and not just to that of the modern intellectual."<sup>15</sup> By dealing with the problems posed by Kant's separation of the faculties, Habermas assumes that he is dealing with problems that affect the man in the street. Rorty disagrees. "What links Habermas to the French thinkers he criticizes," argues Rorty, "is the conviction that the story of modern philosophy . . . is an important part of the story of the democratic societies' attempts at self-reassurance. But it may be that most of the latter story could be told as the history of reformist politics, without much reference to the kinds of theoretical back-up which philosophers have provided for such politics."<sup>16</sup>

Rorty proposes a way to rescue philosophy from the irrelevance to which it has, in its "endless series of reductionist and anti-reductionist moves," condemned itself.

One could try to create a new canon - one in which the mark of a "great philosopher" was awareness of new social and religious and institutional possibilities, as opposed to developing a new dialectical twist in metaphysics or epistemology. That would be a way of splitting the difference between Habermas and Lyotard... We could agree with Lyotard that we need no more metanarratives, but with Habermas that we need less dryness. We could agree with Lyotard that studies of the

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<sup>15</sup> Rorty, p.170.

<sup>16</sup> Rorty, p.169.

communicative competence of a transhistorical subject are of little use in reinforcing our sense of identification with our community, while still insisting on the importance of that sense.<sup>17</sup>

Splitting the difference between Habermas and Lyotard helps Rorty to make his argument about the status of western philosophy and how that status might change. Rorty wants to break new ground at a point somewhere between Habermas and Lyotard, and build a new home for philosophy. The distinction he makes between the two thinkers is not entirely self-serving. Habermas and Lyotard have themselves acknowledged their differences. In his essay "An Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?", Lyotard responds to Habermas's accusation that he is a neo-conservative, and muses sceptically about the unity he thinks Habermas would like to usher in for the "three spheres" identified by Kant. Lyotard refuses any such unity, asserting that the postmodern is "that which in the modern invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations . . . to better produce the feeling that there is something unrepresentable."<sup>18</sup> The task of the postmodern writer, artist, etc., "to invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable . . . , should not," Lyotard argues, "lead us to expect the slightest reconciliation between 'language games.'"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Rorty, p.173.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "An Answer to the Question: What is the Postmodern?," in *The Postmodern Explained*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.15.

<sup>19</sup> Lyotard, p.15.

Reconciliation forces those faculties which Kant had separated into a false and oppressive unity. We have had "our fill of terror," asserts Lyotard, and should view with suspicion any attempt to unify spheres which are necessarily incommensurable.

The Habermas that Lyotard responds to had recently written "Modernity v. Postmodernity," where he asserted that "[in the twentieth century], the differentiation of science, morality and art has come to mean the autonomy of the segments treated by the specialist and at the same time letting them split off from the hermeneutics of everyday communication."<sup>20</sup> Thus is the promise of the Enlightenment - as Habermas sees it - betrayed; everyday life was *not* organized according to rational principles, and "the cognitive potentials of each of these [three] domains" was *not* released. But that does not mean that the project of modernity should be abandoned, according to Habermas. He turns to art to explain how this project might be redeemed.

Habermas is concerned that the division of faculties or spheres has left an isolated expert culture confronting an impoverished everyday culture. But it does not have to be so. He suggests that the rationality specific to each of the three spheres of culture may be redeemed through an appropriation of any one of the spheres by the everyday. He uses art as an example, noting that "as soon as [an aesthetic experience] is used to illuminate a life-historical situation and is related to life problems, it enters into a language game which is no longer that of the aesthetic critic."<sup>21</sup> By *modernity*, Habermas means a reunification of these increasingly reified spheres with an

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<sup>20</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity v. Postmodernity," *New German Critique*, 22 (winter 1981): 9.

<sup>21</sup> Habermas, p.12.



increasingly impoverished life-world. "The project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled. And the reception of art is only one of at least three of its aspects. The project aims at a differentiated relinking of modern culture with an everyday praxis that still depends on vital heritages."<sup>22</sup> Readers familiar with Peter Burger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* will recognize this project, which is quite simply (in the case of the avant-gardes, and particularly dada, at least according to Burger) the reunification of art and life. But, as Burger points out in a response to Habermas's article<sup>23</sup>, one of the terms, either art or life, will suffer in the attempt to fuse the two. Lyotard would agree with this conclusion: when we try to harmonize different worlds, there can only be a dissonance, however minute or soft. Something - the occurrence, as it turns out - must suffer.

So perhaps we might refine and extend Rorty's analysis and assert that Habermas and Lyotard disagree over the effects and the status of unity. For Habermas, unity is something to be worked towards, and will dispel the alienation suffered by those whose everyday lives are in conflict with the "expert spheres" that organize them. For Lyotard, unity is oppressive: it forces incommensurable particulars into an stifling totality, refusing these particulars their specificity. Habermas thinks that there is such a thing as an "ideal speech situation," which is a central concept in his theory

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<sup>22</sup> Habermas, p.13.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Burger, "The Significance of the Avant-Garde for Contemporary Aesthetics: A Reply to Jürgen Habermas," *New German Critique*, 22 (winter 1981): 19-22. As Burger notes: "I ask myself whether the consistency of [Habermas's argument] does not demand too high a prize: the smoothing out of *ruptures* in the development of culture. Ruptures, after all, can be key points of knowledge because they reveal the contradictions of culture."

of communicative action, or action oriented towards reaching an understanding. In such a situation, social actors avail themselves of a communicative reason that allows them to reach uncoerced agreement. Lyotard prefers paradox, the linguistic situation in which no agreement is reached but rather, that which escapes signification is alluded to. This explains his well-known sympathy for avant-garde movements, whose artistic experiments present "a pragmatic situation that did not exist before." When an avant garde movement sets to work, we cannot know ahead of time what it will produce<sup>24</sup>, nor can its members. Lyotard compares avant garde artworks to bottles tossed into the ocean, which may or may not find an audience. There is no ideal speech situation but rather uncertainty.<sup>25</sup>

We might also argue that Habermas and Lyotard differ over the status of rationality. Habermas wants to leaven an pervasive instrumental rationality by recovering a non-instrumental, or communicative, rationality. Lyotard thinks that

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<sup>24</sup> As it could be known, for instance, in both of the course I developed for Conestoga College in 1994-95. The course outlines, which were handed out to the students at the beginning of the course as proof that they had completed the course, were based upon learning objectives (i.e., "...with the completion of this module, the student will be able to discuss/explain/analyze such and such phenomena.") which gave the impression that teaching was a task the effectiveness of which could be decided upon before the teacher actually stood before the class. The learning objectives were the guarantee that the course had already been "taught" and simply had to be passed on to the student in exchange for his or her tuition.

<sup>25</sup> It should also be noted that neither thinker does justice to the other. The role in which Habermas wants to cast reason is hardly as hegemonic as Lyotard might have us believe; it is hard to imagine that Habermas wants the kind of terror that Lyotard thinks accompanies the social or communicative use of reason and projects for unification. On the other hand, Lyotard is not the neo-conservative that Habermas thinks he is. Lyotard identifies language games using, quite often, specific criteria and extensive description, and these identifications would not be entirely alien to Habermas's way of thinking. Indeed, by differentiating between communicative and strategic action, Habermas makes a distinction between two different genres of discourse, each with specific stakes - a distinction of which Lyotard might approve. Nonetheless, Lyotard's discrediting of metanarratives - the well-known "theme" of *The Postmodern Condition* - seems to have little consonance with Habermas's attempt to redeem the exercise of reason in the setting of communicative action.

rationality is an oppressive illusion, a false standard by which all would be judged and if found wanting, excluded, ignored and oppressed. If we were to leave the debate here, though, all we would have is a simple, indeed simplistic, opposition: Habermas wants something, and Lyotard wants the absence of something. Habermas has worked for years developing his theory of communicative action<sup>26</sup>, and it is relatively easy to grasp the contours of his work. But Lyotard is often seen as a negator, a black star refusing not only the metanarratives of modernity (i.e., emancipation) but many of the "common-sense" concepts through which we understand culture and political struggle. For instance, in his article "A Tyranny of Justice," Allen Dunn tells us that "Lyotard rejects all notions of intersubjective or communal identity."<sup>27</sup> Honi Fern Haber, in *Beyond Postmodern Politics*, asserts that "the extent to which Lyotard buys into the thesis of perspectivism leads him to argue that it is impossible to agree on what a name stands for."<sup>28</sup> And Terry Eagleton tells us that Lyotard's "poststructuralist decentering of the subject . . . results . . . in a dismissal of the belief that men and women in society should as far as possible control and determine their own conditions of life."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For a clear and comprehensive discussion of the development and constituents of this theory, see Richard Bernstein's Introduction to *Habermas and Modernity*, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1988), pp.1-32. For a discussion and extension of this theory by Habermas, see "Discourse Ethics" and "Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action" in his *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Trans.Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholzen, (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1990).

<sup>27</sup> Allen Dunn, "A Tyranny of Justice: The Ethics of Lyotard's Differend," *boundary 2*, 20:1 (spring 1993): 205.

<sup>28</sup> Honi Fern Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.17.

<sup>29</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.398.

This kind of critical hyperbole is due, in large part, to the resistance that Lyotard's writing poses to any attempt to reduce it to a few gnomic phrases, or to a theory which might explain all of its digressions and apparent contradictions. When dealing with Habermas, it is easy for the critic to point to his theory of communicative action as the armature around which all his thought is structured, because the theory is an existent. In other words, Habermas's work has a positive capacity, a capacity to describe the way things ought to be. In the search for a similar positive capacity in Lyotard's work, many critics reduce his writing to easily available categories like "liberal pluralism" or "neo-conservatism" as though either or both of these categories could stand as the kernel or enucleation of his thought. The desire to seek an essence, basis or foundation is understandable, since that is what many thinkers, Habermas among them, try to present in their writing. It is difficult to find such an essence in Lyotard's writing, though, because it aspires to the status of that which it describes: the *event*. Now, Lyotard might argue that anytime we read, there is an event, in which case it would not make sense to describe his writing as "more" of an event than Habermas's. But it is certainly the case that his writing tries to sensitize us to the event, both through its content<sup>30</sup> and its often difficult form. Indeed, Lyotard's writing resists paraphrase by its very form: its digressions, repetitions, uncertainties.

What is the event? It is a crucial category in Lyotard's writing, and does not submit to an easy description. For now, we might say that the event is *it happens*, not

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<sup>30</sup> In *The Differend*, Lyotard writes, "You are really reading a book of philosophy, the phrases in it are concatenated in such a way as to show that that concatenation is not just a matter of course and that the rule for their concatenation remains to be found."

what happened. It is pure time, before signification, and exceeding it. It is singular and quite banal: it is *is*. Lyotard eventually enucleates the event in the *phrase* (a unit of analysis bearing a strong resemblance to Foucault's statement in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*). The phrase is a sort of atom, or basic, irreducible quantum of event. Lyotard gives examples of phrases: a man saying hello, a cat raising its tail, a woman saying goodbye. In the next chapter of this thesis, we will encounter once again the phrase, and the systems of linkages in which it becomes enmeshed. For now, it is enough to note that Lyotard's concern for this very basic, almost banal event keeps many critics from fully understanding his work. These critics seek a theory, they want to distil Lyotard's writing and produce an essence that might then be ingested by anyone who wants to "understand" Lyotard. This is extremely difficult to do, however, because the study of the event is marked by deep uncertainty. In fact, it is better to say - since to study the event is next to impossible - that what is uncertain is our *sensitivity to the event*, a sensitivity that Lyotard seeks to foster. Critics take this uncertainty as weakness, equivocation and sophistry. They interpret, trouble, and name this uncertainty.

Habermas's work does not display uncertainty of this sort. Habermas appears very certain in his writing, which he should, since he is practicing reconstructive science<sup>31</sup>, that is, searching for rules that already exist. At the start of this chapter, we noted the difference that Rorty saw between Habermas and Lyotard: Habermas was too serious about philosophy's past, and Lyotard was too extreme in his eagerness to

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<sup>31</sup> For an explanation of what Habermas means by "reconstructive science", see Bernstein, "Introduction," *Habermas and Modernity*. pp.16-17.

discard that past. This distinction was refined by considering the relationship each of these thinkers had to unity: Habermas sought a reunification of the lifeworld with the expert spheres that govern it, whereas Lyotard sought a maintenance of the differences between worlds, between discourses, in an effort to prevent any one discourse from stifling others. Haber calls this, in her reading of *Just Gaming*, a justice of multiplicity. Eagleton calls it liberal pluralism.

We must now refine once again the difference between Habermas and Lyotard: Habermas's work is marked by certainty, whereas Lyotard's work is shot through with uncertainty. This is not a distinction between, respectively, presence and absence. Lyotard not only embraces uncertainty as an ethical possibility, he writes in an uncertain manner. To make the distinction between certainty and uncertainty even clearer, we must compare the work of Habermas and Lyotard even more closely than we have up to this point. To make this comparison, we will consider Habermas's essay "Discourse Ethics," and Lyotard's treatment of ethics in *Just Gaming*. The difference between the two will emerge as considerably more subtle than a simple totality/plurality distinction indicates. We will also see that Lyotard's work is not empty or "weak", that he is not, as a number of critics have argued, simply a negator, but that his writing has a positive capacity as well.

## **ii: Habermas on Ethics**

In "Discourse Ethics," Habermas seeks a "bridging principle" for practical discourse, which he describes as a discourse among several participants in which "each

member must be convinced that [a] proposed norm is equally good for all."<sup>32</sup> Why is this bridging principle necessary? Habermas does not believe that it is enough to ensure that everyone in a practical discourse is equally empowered. He seeks impartiality in the redeeming of validity claims, and this impartiality cannot be reduced to a balance of power. "Lumping together the dimension of the validity of norms . . . and the dimension of the social currency of norms that are actually in effect robs normative validity of its *autonomous significance*."<sup>33</sup> If I understand Habermas correctly, he believes that an agreement compelled among participants in a discourse by threats, bribes, flattery, whining, guilt trips, etc., is not a rational or valid agreement. The validity of norms, in other words, cannot be "assimilated to the imperatives of power [power here meaning variations of coercion]." Rather,

what is expressed in normative validity is the authority of a *general will* shared by all concerned, a will that has been divested of its imperative quality and has taken on a moral quality.<sup>34</sup>

The bridging principle supplies this moral quality, and is analogous to the principle of induction in theoretical discourse. In the latter discourse exists a "gap between particular observations and general hypotheses" that induction bridges. Habermas establishes a moral principle to bridge an analogous gap: between the "universe of norms," on the one hand, and "the anticipated justifiability of

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<sup>32</sup> Jürgen Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), p.71.

<sup>33</sup> Habermas, p.74, my emphasis.

<sup>34</sup> Habermas, p.74.

corresponding 'ought' claims"<sup>35</sup> on the other. For Habermas, norms have an existence independent of speech acts; "the locus of normative claims to validity," we are told, "is *primarily in norms* and only derivatively in speech acts."<sup>36</sup> Lyotard might call Habermas's assertion Platonic: the speech act derives from the norm, as a copy derives from the original. For Lyotard, this sort of distinction eclipses the specificity or eventness of "speech acts", eclipses what happens when a phrase presents the addressor, addressee, and the referent, and accords the speech act the status of a "fragile, but possibly decipherable trace."<sup>37</sup> A large part of Lyotard's effort in *Just Gaming* is devoted to restoring to the speech act its status as event. But, we have not yet finished with Habermas; it still remains to discuss his bridging, or universal, principle.

In section 4 of "Discourse Ethics," Habermas recasts Kant's categorical imperative, shifting its emphasis "from what each can will without contradiction to be a general law, to what all can will in agreement to be a universal norm."<sup>38</sup> This is a shift from a monologic to a polylogic view of justification, which for Habermas is crucial; it is a shift consonant with his theory of communicative action, which differentiates between communicative action, or action oriented towards reaching an understanding, and strategic action, or action designed to procure a success. The reformulation of the categorical imperative Habermas names the universalization

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<sup>35</sup> Habermas, p.62.

<sup>36</sup> Habermas, p.60, my emphasis.

<sup>37</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p.6.

<sup>38</sup> Habermas, p.67.



principle, or (U), which is as follows:

*All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects [that the general observance of a norm] can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone's interests.*<sup>39</sup>

This principle is meant to *ground* the choice of norms amongst a group of people, and is supposed to prevent this choice from being based simply on a balance of power; it is meant to provide *impartiality* in choosing norms. According to Habermas, the universal will established by (U) is "grasped *cognitively*" by the participants in the discourse. (U) is the bridging principle between the varying interests among participants (which are thematized or foregrounded when a norm's validity is questioned), and the impartial norm, exterior to speech acts, which (U) allows participants to choose.

Habermas then sets himself the task of grounding (U). The details of his "transcendental-pragmatic justification of the moral principle" need not detain us here.<sup>40</sup> It will suffice to note his starting point and ongoing point of reference for this justification: Karl-Otto Apel's notion of the *performative contradiction*, which we find whenever a person makes an assertion the content of which contradicts the pragmatic conditions under which he or she made the assertion.<sup>41</sup> Habermas says of the

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<sup>39</sup> Habermas, p.65.

<sup>40</sup> See Habermas, "Discourse Ethics," section 7.

<sup>41</sup> I am caught in a performative contradiction if I assert "I am dead," since I would have to be alive to make such an assertion. Detecting a performative contradiction involves what Lyotard, following Genette, calls a *metalepsis*, "a change in the level of one's take on the referent." See Lyotard, *The Differend*, pp.25-26.

"fallibilist", i.e., the sceptic who denies that moral norms may be grounded, that "in taking part in the process of reasoning [which is needed if the sceptic is able to assert that moral principles cannot be grounded], even the consistent fallibilist has already accepted as valid a minimum number of unavoidable rules of criticism. Yet this state of affairs is incompatible with the principle of fallibilism."<sup>42</sup>

It will be remembered that for Habermas, (U) is a rule of argumentation; it is meant to be acted out, performed, done. It is meant to prevent monologism. In light of Apel's elucidation of the performative contradiction, then, Habermas asserts that, by engaging in argumentation, certain inescapable rules are *already accepted*, even if unconsciously or informally, by participants: "in practical discourses we always already make use of substantive normative rules of argumentation. It is *these rules* alone that transcendental pragmatics is in a position to derive." The principle of universalization is "implied by the presuppositions of argumentation in general." And so for Habermas, this principle is validated by anyone who accepts the "presuppositions of argumentative speech."<sup>43</sup>

When Habermas says that he has grounded the moral, or universal, principle, however, he means something very specific. For instance, he does not require transcendental pragmatics to deliver an "ultimate justification." Rather, he characterizes the justification of the moral principle as *unavoidable*:

Demonstrating the existence of performative contradictions helps to

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<sup>42</sup> Habermas, p.81.

<sup>43</sup> Habermas, p.87.

identify the rules necessary for any argumentation game to work; if one is to argue at all, there are no substitutes. The fact that there are *no alternatives* to these rules of argumentation is what is being proved; the rules themselves are not being *justified*.<sup>44</sup>

Habermas rejects pluralism. Argumentation does not simply admit all views as equal, after which they fight for dominance. It is instead guided by already existing rules that cannot be avoided while one argues. Habermas's justification of the moral principle then is in fact an uncovering or revealing of, a pointing to, the truth and indubitability of the rules underlying the moral principle. Habermas does not justify these rules, but uses their *existence* to justify the moral principle. They provide the principle with certainty. "The possibility of choosing between communicative and strategic action," he tells us, "exists only abstractly; it exists only for someone who takes the contingent perspective of an individual actor. From the perspective of the lifeworld to which the actor belongs, *these modes of action are not matters of free choice*."<sup>45</sup>

The arguing subject is thus trapped in the spotlight of Habermas's implacable reconstructive project, which had already illuminated the previously shadowed realm of argumentation. You think there is no reason behind the arguments you engage in, he tells the arguing subject, but really, there is. Once this is established, Habermas's work is done. A refusal to hew to the argumentation he grounds is a mistake or an error rather than a different strategy. Habermas reconstructively lays bare the

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<sup>44</sup> Habermas, p.95.

<sup>45</sup> Habermas, p.96, my emphasis.

inescapable rules that undergird ethical argumentation. These rules are thus ontologized, placed beyond doubt. They exist.

### iii: Lyotard on Ethics

In Lyotard's writing, ethics has no ontology. It does not exist in some separate "universe" of norms. Rather, ethics occurs, ethics happens, and we do not say that an act is ethical until it has happened. For Lyotard, ethics is not a plan to follow or a model to conform to, but an event that happens to the subject. He refuses to say of any mode of action, "That is ethical," because in certain instances, it may not be. A large part of *Just Gaming* is devoted to explaining why Habermas, when he writes of a "universe of norms," needs scare quotes around the word *universe*. Lyotard does not think that norms can be elsewhere (where else would they be?), and there cannot be any model of a just society that is separate from that society's unfolding in experience. Ethics is not a theory, but a *language game* the outcome of which we cannot know in advance. Ethics is uncertain, and so is Lyotard's writing about it.

In *Just Gaming*, a record of seven days of conversation between Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, Lyotard makes his infamous distinction between the language game of description and the language game of prescription. We will consider this distinction in greater detail later in the essay. For now, we need only note that Lyotard differentiates between many different language games and also insists on the incommensurability of all language games. For instance, the language game of description describes things. A typical sentence from the descriptive game might be

"There is a 25% unemployment rate in Toronto." The language game of prescription tells us what to do. A typical sentence from this language game is "Remedy the high unemployment rate in Toronto." For Lyotard, there is no connection between these two games. A good description of a situation cannot guide us in formulating prescriptions for that situation. Every language game is governed by specific rules, and each is distinct. Lyotard thinks it is a mistake to confuse one game with another. We will see why this is so shortly.

It should come as no surprise that this view of the prescriptive draws strong criticism. In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton summarizes the "system" he thinks Lyotard propounds in *Just Gaming*: "What is morally just is to generate as many language games as possible, all of them strictly incommensurable."<sup>46</sup> Eagleton is one of several critics who assert that Lyotard makes a case for a brand of liberal pluralism that is consonant with his poststructuralist "tendencies". Seyla Benhabib, responding to Lyotard's assertion in *The Postmodern Condition* that different language games, such as the didactic and the prescriptive, are incommensurable, argues that

insisting on the incommensurability of language games . . . may generate moral and political indifference . . . the activation of differences may not amount to a democratic respect of the right of the "other" to be, but a conservative plea to place the other, because of her otherness, outside of the pale of our common humanity and mutual

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<sup>46</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p.399.

responsibility.<sup>47</sup>

Benhabib identifies a "vaguely defined neo-liberal pluralism" at the close of *The Postmodern Condition*, where Lyotard suggests that the public be given free access to computer memory banks and data storage systems. Benhabib does not think that this access will change anything, and will only maintain existing power relations, as she thinks liberal pluralism implies. She does not reject pluralism outright, for it has such selling points as "tolerance and the public competition of ideas," but pluralism also avoids analyzing "structural sources of inequality, influence, resource and power,"<sup>48</sup> and thus has little to offer real struggles for meaning. It is fine, Benhabib tells us, to imagine language games coexisting in some ideal space, with no game dominating any other, but in the real world, different language games come into conflict, and the outcomes have real consequences. She offers the example of the struggle against the pro-life movement: the stakes in struggling against that foe are greater than winning a language game.

Honi Fern Haber, in *Beyond Postmodern Politics*, echoes Benhabib's criticism. She too worries about "the conservatism implicit in Lyotard's proffered paganism." She approves of his multiplicity of justices, since it encourages a politics of difference that might include normally silenced voices. The doctrine that every language game is sovereign and has no rights in the territory of any other, though, "does not necessarily

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<sup>47</sup> Seyla Benhabib, "Epistemologies of the Postmodern: A Reply to Jean-François Lyotard," *New German Critique*, 33 (Fall, 1994): 122-123.

<sup>48</sup> Benhabib, p.124.

give voice to difference."<sup>49</sup> Language games are not all equally empowered, and some by their very nature trespass on the space of others. Thus, "Lyotard's theory does nothing to change or even challenge the status quo. Lyotard's theory must address the political realities, otherwise, the domination of the more powerful language games and its repressive power structure will remain intact and the voices of dissent will continue to be stifled."<sup>50</sup>

Lyotard's work cannot be summarized in a quick or facile manner, and it will take time to sketch out even the most basic contours of his thought. What should be clear, though, is the critical consensus: in the opinion of his critics, Lyotard is at best a liberal pluralist and at worst an apologist for the "status quo", and by any account, politically flaccid. It is easy to see why, when Lyotard separates the prescriptive from the descriptive in *Just Gaming*, and asserts that we have nothing but a "politics of opinion" to guide our judgements, Eagleton becomes acidic: "Prescriptions for Lyotard are thus left hanging in the air, cut off from any rational knowledge of society. There is no such thing as political knowledge, whatever the African National Congress might think it is up to. Thus suspended in vacant space, the prescriptive or political is left to the mercies of intuitionism, decisionism, conventionalism, consequentialism, sophistry, casuistry, [etc.]."<sup>51</sup>

According to his critics, Lyotard's goofy liberalism asserts that no language

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<sup>49</sup> Haber, p.32.

<sup>50</sup> Haber, p.32.

<sup>51</sup> Eagleton, p.398.

game should be rejected, and thus that all that is spoken should be welcomed. No voice should be refused. This prescription for all-inclusiveness makes tempers flare, not only because it is "weak" (i.e., liberal), but also because of its lack of normative content. The regulating idea in Lyotard's "theory" of justice is free play itself, or what Habermas calls a justice of multiplicity. In this system, says Eagleton, "plurality . . . is a good in itself, quite regardless of its ethical or political substance."<sup>52</sup> In the absence of a regulating idea, Lyotard's doctrine is destined to be governed by force and deceit. Habermas tells us that, in Lyotard's thought, "justice (as well as morality) becomes a matter of the dominance of the strongest voice."<sup>53</sup> Eagleton fears that in Lyotard's world, "the one who has the smoothest tongue or the raciest story has the power."<sup>54</sup>

All these critics have had essentially the same intuition about Lyotard's work, and as we will see later, they are not entirely incorrect. They have overlooked, though, crucial aspects of Lyotard's thought, and in particular, have misunderstood the nature of the language game. By language game, Lyotard means a *pragmatic* process, not a process of meaning creation. The language game does not send a message, but places a subject. Lyotard is not concerned with what is said when a language game is played, but the way it is said, the saying and playing of the game, the way something is both said and received. Every language game throws into relief four poles or pragmatic positions: addressor, addressee, referent and sense (although Lyotard rarely deals with

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<sup>52</sup> Eagleton, p.399.

<sup>53</sup> Habermas, p.31.

<sup>54</sup> Eagleton, p.396.



the last pole in his work). As language games change, so do these poles, so that the addressor in the didactic game may later be the referent in the arbitration game, and later, the addressee in the seduction game. Language games provide subjects with their subjectivity, and since we never play just one game, we are never just one subject.

Language games appear early on in *Just Gaming*, when Lyotard makes a distinction between the descriptive game and the prescriptive game. Traditionally, he tells us, lawmakers have needed a true and accurate description of the social body in order to make decisions about it. Lyotard calls this the Platonic or ontological model, in which mode it suffices simply to conform to a model to be just. Lyotard finds something strange about this. How, he asks, "can one derive by means of implication commands from discourses that are not discourses of knowledge, whose function is to state the truth, and that are determinable with respect to truth or falsehood. This passage from one to the other is, properly speaking, unintelligible."<sup>55</sup> Lyotard seeks the *pragmatic* mode in which justice functions, not its ideological or theoretical mode. When he tells us that we cannot derive a prescriptive from a descriptive, he is not saying that such a passage is absurd or ill-advised, but pragmatically preposterous. Prescriptions address us directly, and descriptions do not. According to Lyotard, a descriptive discourse is centred on a referent - a topic like death or taxes - whereas a prescriptive discourse is a second-person discourse in which "commands are explicitly addressed to their addressees." Lyotard continues: "It seems to me that there is in justice, insofar as it refers to prescriptions, and it necessarily does, a *use of language*

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<sup>55</sup> Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.22.

that is fundamentally different from the theoretical [that is, descriptive] use."<sup>56</sup> Imagine the difference between, on the one hand, hearing from a teacher that, in our culture, it is customary for children to care for their elderly parents and, on the other, being told by one's ailing mother, "Please take care of me." The addressee of the second phrase will be affected differently than the addressee of the first - indeed, for Lyotard, will *be different*, even if they are the "same" subject.<sup>57</sup>

*Language games do not say, they do:* they seduce, they convince, they mollify, they instruct, and they command. They are not merely political positions. The pro-life lobby is not a language game, as Benhabib asserts. It employs a language game, or several language games, and some of these games might be employed by others who are vehemently opposed to the pro-life lobby. Pro-life protesters picket clinics with signs bearing images of aborted fetuses. They use the language game of ostension or demonstration, which might also be used by classroom teachers who are resolutely pro-choice.

When Lyotard asserts that language games must be maintained in their sovereignty, as he does in *Just Gaming*, his critics take this to mean that political positions must be maintained in *their* sovereignty, that every political group must get an equal say, environmental groups as well as white power groups. Lyotard does not

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<sup>56</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.24, my emphasis.

<sup>57</sup> The reader might test the truth of this distinction by remembering the last time his or her partner/spouse/roommate said "Look at all those dirty dishes in the sink," or "I can't believe how fast the grass is growing." These are called hints, but as we know, not all hints are taken by those at whom they are directed. When this happens, the person for whom the hint was intended is often blamed for "being slow on the uptake," etc. But we could also call them good Lyotardians: they don't mix up language games. "Say what you mean," they exclaim; or, "Play the right game!"

want the slogans, attitudes, broadsheets and demonstrations of every political group to receive equal consideration. He wants *all ways of speaking* to be maintained, not all that is spoken. The novelty and subtlety of this position should not be underestimated. A political position is spoken, it is content. A language game speaks, it is an event, a happening. By maintaining language games in their sovereignty, Lyotard wants to respect and do justice to the event, to experience. This kind of respect takes a great deal of humility. It also requires sensitivity to experiences, to the ways in which we address, and are addressed. Humility and sensitivity are required, in turn, to abide by Lyotard's definition of injustice in *Just Gaming*. The unjust, he tells us, is not the opposite of the just, "but that which prohibits that the question of the just and the unjust be, and remain, raised."<sup>58</sup> This does not mean that the just allows all views. The definition simply ensures that the debate over the just and the unjust continues; the definition requires listening.

If Lyotard thinks it is just to listen, and the central argument of this thesis is that he does, then the accusations of conventionalism levelled against him by Eagleton are untenable. Lyotard is not arbitrary in his political opinions. Thébaud asks him if he thinks it is unjust that there is an American computer in Germany that helps to plan bombing missions in Vietnam. Lyotard answers yes, but he cannot say exactly why. He thinks it is unjust. This opinion is not, in itself, necessarily objectionable; Eagleton the Marxist would probably agree with it. The problem is that there is no *reason* for it. Lyotard is criticized not for the content of his opinions, but because he cannot justify

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<sup>58</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.67.

them. As we have already seen, he rejects the conventional notion of justification, the derivation of a prescriptive from a descriptive.

The split between description and prescription utterly separates Lyotard from Habermas. Habermas justifies his universalization principle for argumentation by appealing to rules that already exist and that all arguing actors make use of whether they know it or not. Because something exists, Habermas says, something else is right. Lyotard impudently severs this bond. "The fact that two million are unemployed in a country does not explain that unemployment must be remedied," he writes in *The Differend*. For Lyotard, justice must be waited on, it cannot be proved. By allowing the prescriptive to stand on its own, he forces those who must make decisions to actually make them, without guidance from an "elsewhere". Lyotard takes ethics very seriously, because he does not think that we have the comfort of a decision that was made for us by someone or something else. We must live through ethics, through an experience the certitude of which is not at all guaranteed.

Ethics happens, and it cannot be justified, which means that Lyotard does not think that ethics can be played out following an already written script. Lyotard deploys the language game as a tool for investigating precisely the suspicion he is put under. His critics say he cannot justify his ethics, but he shows that ethics can have no justification. His critics are suspicious, they want proof, but no proof is forthcoming. Lyotard has no problem with this lack of proof; by the time of *The Differend*, he thematizes it, and suggests that we renounce it. This is not easy, but renunciation is precisely what humility demands of us.

Liotard and Thébaud agree that the descriptive and the prescriptive must be separated. One cannot make a judgement, that is, deliver a prescription, based on a model. One cannot derive the *ought* from the *is*; the *ought* is one language game, the *is* is another, and they cannot mix. Lyotard rejects the Platonic notion that "we can draw prescriptions from a description that is true."<sup>59</sup> He criticizes not only this Platonic mode, but the figure of the intellectual in general, whose good descriptions of a problem are supposed to guide the Prince in formulating prescriptions. This cannot happen: the descriptive describes the just society, but only the prescriptive brings it about. About this, Lyotard is emphatic: "What interests me in someone like Levinas is the forceful assertion of the original character of requests."<sup>60</sup> Prescriptions are not diluted versions of another force, there is no horizon behind them from which they draw their power and authority. They possess their own energy, a pragmatic energy.

Liotard argues for another mode of justice that respects the pragmatic specificity of prescriptions: a politics of prudence, or *phronesis*. Lyotard derives it in large part from Aristotle, who recognized "that a judge worthy of the name has no true model to guide his judgements, and that the true nature of the judge is to pronounce judgements, just so, without criteria."<sup>61</sup> The Aristotelian judge must judge case by case, because "each situation is singular."<sup>62</sup> This judge must develop a good technique,

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<sup>59</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.23.

<sup>60</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.25.

<sup>61</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.26.

<sup>62</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.27.

and be responsive and flexible, not dogmatic and rigid. This judge does not deploy facts, but tactics: she will speak and listen differently while hearing a domestic dispute than she will while hearing a business dispute. Both may involve theft: a husband steals from his wife, an employee steals from her boss. The judge will not settle these cases by falling back on a principle - Thou shalt not steal - but instead, as Lyotard says, "evaluate relations: of force, of values, of quantities and of qualities; but to evaluate them, there are no criteria, nothing but opinions."<sup>63</sup>

Opinions, of course, are subject to caprice and the vagaries of power; hence, Eagleton's scepticism about Lyotard's Aristotelian version of judgement. The door is opened for Eagleton's stampede of horrors: conventionalism, casuistry, etc. But this version of judgement also has its boosters. John D. Caputo, in his *Against Ethics*, devotes several pages to an exposition of phronesis as he understands it from Lyotard (and Aristotle); he points out that, in the olden days, phronesis meant rules without rules.<sup>64</sup> The phronimos matured in the cask of experience, and did not feel any anxiety in his or her later years about walking the ethical tightropes that induce trembling in the young. In our time, Caputo tells us, things are different. We live with a multitude of *disasters* (dis-aster: loss of the star that guides or protects us), and so experience does not have the consistency required to mold us the way it used to. But this only means that one must embrace phronesis even more closely, for it is the only mode to

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<sup>63</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.27.

<sup>64</sup> The epigraph to *Just Gaming* is from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: "The rule of the undetermined is itself undetermined."

steer us through the awful formless flux that the Real has mutated into.<sup>65</sup>

It is odd that a short passage in one of Lyotard's books should come to stand as a representative "theory" of judgement. This lack of criteria is repeatedly invoked, either as a problem (Eagleton) or as a daring leap over (into?) the abyss (Caputo). It is odd, because it seems to me that Lyotard brings up the example of the judge, or *phronimos*, not to establish a theory of judgement, prudence, *phronesis*, etc., but to show the pragmatic functioning of language games. The judge who judges without criteria is judging in what Lyotard calls a *pagan* mode. "There is paganism," asserts Lyotard, "whenever there is this very curious representation wherein he who states the just is himself as caught up in the very sphere of language as those who will be the recipients of his prescriptions, and may eventually be judged by the judge."<sup>66</sup> So there is paganism when there is *humility*.

In the second chapter of *Just Gaming*, Lyotard starts to sketch for Thébaud what humility involves. Lyotard draws attention to the way in which pragmatic positions change as language games change: the addressor in the didactic game by day might be the addressee in the seduction game by night. Lyotard takes these differing pragmatic positions quite seriously:

There are several ways of changing the world. Prescriptions are not alone in causing the world to change . . . a description can change the world. It changes it in another way, to other rhythms, but it changes it

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<sup>65</sup> See John Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>66</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.27.

no less than a prescription. And when you say "to change worlds," that means "to change pragmatic positions." There are many ways of changing positions, and these ways define a language game.<sup>67</sup>

The language game is not "about" content. Rather, it establishes positions for subjects, precisely in the manner of a game. The language game plays us, turns us into moments in its unfolding: "these are games that one 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."<sup>68</sup> The multiplicity of selves referred to by Lyotard should not be understood as a plentitude, as a cornucopia of selves of which the subject partakes in enjoyment. The game masters the players, surrounds them, immerses them. One never stands outside these games<sup>69</sup>. Rather than Haber's "unbounded nature of the self," we have a self that finds itself *always* bounded, *always* immersed. It is in this sense that humility is invoked in connection with Lyotard's paganism; remembering the root of the word, *humus*, or ground, we see that humility names the sense one has of being grounded. This is in opposition to the poststructuralism in which Eagleton and Haber claim Lyotard is mired, in which the self is cut loose from "hegemonic" discourses and floats above the discursive field, setting down where things seem most clement, exciting, risky, or pleasing.

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<sup>67</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.52.

<sup>68</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.51.

<sup>69</sup> This view of language games is strongly consonant with Hans Georg Gadamer's view of play and of the nature of the game in his *Truth and Method*. See Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translation edited by Garnet Barden and John Cumming, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), p.91-119.



Lyotard insists on the *limits* imposed on the subject by discourse. Unlike Foucault, he does not banish the subject from analysis, but locates the subject in a larger order. He does not deprive the subject of the right to speak, but tries to determine the conditions under which the subject might secure the right to speak in the wake of legitimation's unravelling. According to Lyotard, one of the most important features of paganism is that "one is in the position of listener."<sup>70</sup> Lyotard has just finished discussing the inadequacy of the model of justice and has turned, with Thébaud, to a discussion of the modern enunciation and the autonomy that founds it. Here, "one will say that a statement is just if it can be uttered by all the wills, inasmuch as in uttering it, those wills do not alienate their freedom."<sup>71</sup> The subject is not only the receiver of laws, but the giver of laws, "at once the sender and the addressee of the prescription." Now, Lyotard rejects this mode of justice as he earlier rejected the Platonic mode of justice based on the model, but for a different reason. He opposes the justice founded on autonomy to the justice of paganism, noting that "in paganism, there is the intuition [or] the idea that no maker of statements, no utterer, is ever autonomous."<sup>72</sup>

In place of autonomy, Lyotard offers heteronomy, which he equates with tradition. As though realizing he has been duped, Thébaud exclaims, "This vaunted paganism would be nothing but the tradition, then." Lyotard agrees: "paganism is the

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<sup>70</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.33.

<sup>71</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.30.

<sup>72</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.31.

tradition."<sup>73</sup> By tradition, Lyotard means an immersion in the pragmatic conditions under which one speaks, rather than an objective position outside these conditions. He offers as an example the "savage" storyteller who, like the pagan judge, does not invent content, but means for getting it across. Lyotard discusses the narrative pragmatics of the Cashinahua Indians of the Amazon River. Within their tradition, we are told, one may only tell a story once one has heard it told, and also, once one has heard oneself narrated in that told story. There is no point at which a member of the tribe may stand outside of this tradition as an observer. Such a pragmatic embedding is important to Lyotard: "We are always in opinion and there is no possible discourse of truth on the situation. And there is no discourse because one is caught up in a story, and one cannot get out of this story to take up a metalinguistic position from which the whole could be dominated."<sup>74</sup>

The speaking subject is placed before "the backdrop of an obligation." The will is humbled. Lyotard glosses the death of the author: under a regime of heteronomy such as the Cashinahua, "human beings are not the authors of what they tell, that is, of what they do . . . there are never authors."<sup>75</sup> Lyotard is trying to draw attention away from the pole of the addressor and towards the pole of the addressee - the receiver or, in paganism, the relay. Before one can speak, one must listen. Something must happen before the will can be exercised in enunciation. This is an aspect of what Lyotard calls

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<sup>73</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.33.

<sup>74</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.43.

<sup>75</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.36.

"Jewish thought" which turns out, in his writings, to be the thought of Levinas. In this thought, the one who speaks, who gives laws and who obligates cannot be known. The task is not to know the speaker, work through the demand made by the speaker, and then take the speaker's place as the legislator. Rather, *the task is to listen*. Thébaud tells Lyotard, "When you speak of a discourse that privileges the pole of the addressee above all, I think you should indicate that in such a case the question of autonomy or heteronomy does not arise . . . . Otherwise it might be understood as servitude." Lyotard agrees: "It is not servitude at all, because this is prior to the question of freedom. It is what Levinas calls passivity . . . , and of which he says that it is obviously prior to what may pass for passivity once free choices must be made."<sup>76</sup>

Paganism does not silence the subject, but limits the pride it takes in speaking. That is why Lyotard identifies paganism with tradition. Tradition is the weight or pressure just out of our field of experience, exerting a persistent influence. It is a heritage, and one might argue that it is better to grapple with one's heritage, and place one's imprint upon it, than it is to reject tradition and find oneself without moorings. Lyotard shows how language games compel us to take on traditions, how they immerse us in tradition.

The reader may have noted, however, an ambiguity around the status of language games. Lyotard affirms that language games play us, but he also tells Thébaud that it is the job of the good pagan to invent new moves for language games and even new games. The pagan judge and the Cashinahua storyteller both invent as

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<sup>76</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.37.

they perform. The judge must invent criteria on the spot, she must assess matters quickly. She must be perceptive, alert and decisive, because there will be many cases to try throughout the day, and she cannot dwell on one to the exclusion of others. The storyteller must also be quick on his feet, or nobody will listen to him. He must watch the audience, and note when they are flagging, putting aside particularly winning lines for those times. (I think teaching is much the same.)

Neither the storyteller nor the judge could be described as dispossessed, and yet this is the implication of a language game that turns subjects into its players. Lyotard acknowledges the tension between a language game that plays and a language game that is played. He noted, after *Just Gaming*, that the language game might have been too "human", too much of a tool to carry out the aims of humans.<sup>77</sup> The listening subject that he sketches out in *Just Gaming* appears in two modes: a pagan, or heteronomous mode, and a "Jewish", or Levinasian mode. A subject is more likely to use language games as tools in the first mode, and be used by language games in the second. This distinction, in turn, corresponds to a distinction between two different strains of poststructuralist thought. We turn now to a discussion of these two to complete our look at Lyotard's thought on humility and listening in *Just Gaming*.

Lyotard's critics are eager to place his thought in already existing categories. One is liberal pluralism and another one is poststructuralism. Eagleton and Haber also seem somewhat confused, calling Lyotard a poststructuralist here, and a postmodernist

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<sup>77</sup> "[I]t seemed to me that 'language games' implied players that made use of language like a toolbox, thus repeating the constant arrogance of Western anthropocentrism." Lyotard in an interview with Georges Van Den Abbeele (translator of *Le Différend* into the English *The Différend*), *Diacritics*, (Fall, 1984): 17.

there. It may be hard to make sense of these arbitrary designations, but there is attached to these names a relatively stable characterization, at the core of which is the assertion that there exists a body of theory favouring anti-foundationalist, anti-humanist, radically plural modes of thought and action. Meaning cannot be fixed, "the subject" is decentered and unstable, and agency cannot be grounded. Eagleton tells us: "Plurality . . . as for poststructuralism in general, is a good in itself, quite regardless of its ethical or political substance."<sup>78</sup> Haber claims that Lyotard bases his work on a "structuralist/ poststructuralist [!] model [which] is derived from the Saussurean/Derridean view which sees language as a plurality of heterogeneous and incommensurable 'language games.'"<sup>79</sup> We are told by Haber three times in two pages that both language and the self are "fragmented, decentered, protean and incomplete."<sup>80</sup>; and she later asserts: "By 'terror' Lyotard means to denote anything which would contain or delimit the unbounded nature of the self."<sup>81</sup> This view of poststructuralism is strongly dependent on a very particular reading and extension of Derrida, by which the critic understands that language has no basis in referentiality, and "free play" emerges dominant. Such a pseudo-Derridean view of poststructuralism is consonant with postmodernism's celebration of pastiche and heterogeneity. Poststructuralism thus emerges as the philosophical base for a superstructural semiotic

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<sup>78</sup> Eagleton, p.399

<sup>79</sup> Haber, p.13.

<sup>80</sup> Haber, pp.14-15.

<sup>81</sup> Haber, p.21.

carnival which (at best, according to Haber) has the capacity to resist hegemonic discourses like "science."

By characterizing Lyotard as a carnivalesque poststructuralist, his critics easily read his discussion of the plurality of language games as a symptom of a broader tendency to embrace philosophical and political wackiness as a tactic directed against grand narratives. Lyotard is uncomfortable with this brand of poststructuralism and he is wise to suspect it. If poststructuralism consisted only in the celebration of an unbounded or protean self, it would be nothing more than an apology for consumer culture. Capitalism invests so much energy in the "protean" self that is "businesslike" by day, "unbridled" or "passionate" by night, a self that gives up historical memory in favour of the caprice demanded by taste and "innovation."<sup>82</sup> The study of language games and the attempt to navigate between a pagan and a Levinasian subject owes a debt to the poststructuralist "tradition" that places importance on the limits and the humbling of the subject. There are several sources for this poststructuralism, but the one we consider here is Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.<sup>83</sup> In *The Archaeology*, Foucault refused to analyze discourse as a flowering, as that which issues forth from the subject. He refused to refer discourse back to a source or horizon: "the description of statements does not attempt to evade verbal performances in order to discover behind them or below their apparent surface a hidden element, a

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<sup>82</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the relationship between the imperatives of capitalist culture and the "poststructuralism" against which I am protesting here, see Susan Bordo, "Material Girl: The Effacements of Postmodern Culture." *Michigan Quarterly Review*, (Fall, 1991).

<sup>83</sup> As we will see, Lyotard's basic unit of analysis in *The Differend*, the phrase, bears a strong resemblance to Foucault's basis unit of analysis in *The Archaeology*, the statement.

secret meaning that lies buried within them, or which emerges through them without saying so."<sup>84</sup> Foucault set out a plan in *The Archaeology* to study enunciations in their positivity or exteriority. The hunt for a hidden meaning was given up, and the enunciation was considered instead as the function of various forces and pressures, as a phenomenon shaped by institutional constraints. The enunciation was to be studied archaeologically rather than hermeneutically.

The passage in *The Archaeology* which most clearly sets the context (or, in Lyotard's terminology, presents the sense) for what Lyotard will try to do in *Just Gaming* is found in the chapter "The Description of Statements." Foucault discusses the enunciative level, that level at which he believes language must be considered:

The "signifying" structure of language always refers back to something else . . . Language always seems to be inhabited by the other, the elsewhere, the distant; it is hollowed by absence. Is it not the locus in which something other than itself appears, does not its own existence seem to be dissipated in this function? But if one wishes to describe the enunciative level, one must consider that existence itself; question language, not in the direction to which it refers, but in the dimension that gives it; ignore its power to designate . . . and instead turn one's attention to the moment that determine's its unique and limited existence.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p.109.

<sup>85</sup> Foucault, p.III.

Lyotard's view of the functioning of language games bears a strong resemblance to Foucault's insights here. Foucault also anticipates Lyotard's view of the subject when he tells us, in *The Archaeology*, that "[if] a group of signs can be called 'statement' . . . it is because the position of the subject can be assigned."<sup>86</sup> The subject is not a source, but a location - an effect of something else: in Foucault's case, discourse, and in Lyotard's, the playing of language games. Foucault hunts down this subject-effect with an empiricist's implacable desire to catalogue phenomena, and his positivist tone suffuses Lyotard's discussion of language games in *Just Gaming*, and of phrases in *The Differend*.

Throughout *The Archaeology*, Foucault reminds the reader that his analysis is likely to upset a great many people who believe in foundations and guarantees for knowledge. "I know how irritating it can be," he writes, "to treat discourses in terms not of the gentle, silent, intimate consciousness that is expressed in them, but of an obscure set of anonymous rules. How unpleasant it is to reveal the limitations and necessities of a practice where one is used to seeing, in all its pure transparency, the expression of genius and freedom."<sup>87</sup> Lyotard is not as smug as this. He knows that "the expression of genius and freedom" is one of only many language games, and that to stand outside that game and examine it is only to stand inside another language game. Lyotard is not nearly as unforgiving and clinical as Foucault is.

There is a phrase from the conclusion of *The Archaeology*, though, that orbits

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<sup>86</sup> Foucault, p.95.

<sup>87</sup> Foucault, p.210.



Lyotard's writing like an abiding moon: "I have not denied - far from it - the possibility of changing discourse: I have deprived the sovereignty of the subject of the exclusive and instantaneous right to it."<sup>88</sup> Lyotard also withholds the sovereignty of the subject, but not from everyone, and not in the same way, and certainly not at the same time. Not everyone thinks they have the right to always be heard, not everyone thinks they must be listened to unconditionally. Some people know that it is their role to sometimes be silent, and to show humility. Such people play the game of the just, "in which the rule deals with audition."<sup>89</sup> By characterizing justice in this way, Lyotard forges a link to the poststructuralism of Foucault, by imagining in concrete terms how discourse might be changed by subjects who have no control over, or access to, it. The celebration of unbounded subjectivity and free play, which one might detect between the lines of *Just Gaming*, is banished by the time of *The Differend*; these hallmarks of "poststructuralism" are in fact excoriated by Lyotard, who demands the humility of the subject before language even at the same time as, in *The Differend*, he lets a trace of the "human", or a concern for the interiority of those who have been wronged, seep into his writing.

#### **iv: Summary**

This chapter situates Lyotard in his philosophical and theoretical context. We started by looking at the opposition between Lyotard and Habermas, an opposition

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<sup>88</sup> Foucault, p.209.

<sup>89</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.72.

which initially appeared as a "reason v. paralogy" debate in the view of Rorty. It partially occluded, however, two entirely incommensurate, radically different projects: we saw that Habermas saw ethics as an ontology, whereas Lyotard saw it as an event. We then saw how Lyotard refracts the event through his use of language games in *Just Gaming*; how he develops the possibility of a humbled, or listening, subject - a subject which appears in two "modes": a pagan or heteronomous mode, and a Jewish, or Levinasian, mode; and how he builds on the work done by Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

The distinction between a pagan mode and a Levinasian mode has already been noted. Confusions such as this will likely keep the reader from accepting *Just Gaming* as an entirely satisfying work. Although we have seen that the conclusions of Benhabib, Haber and Eagleton were compromised by inaccurate readings of Lyotard's work, a good case can also be made for the intuition that all three share - that Lyotard is lobbying for something like liberal pluralism, at least in *Just Gaming*. Lyotard and Thébaud acknowledge as much. The latter confesses that he is not entirely satisfied with Lyotard's politics of opinion: "I think that a politics that would regulate itself by the idea of . . . plurality, and that would propose to develop minorities in such a way that no minority could ever become a majority . . . would renew the very difficulties you were recalling yourself but a while ago. It seems to run into the difficulties of monistic philosophy, of a philosophy of the will. Since any and every minority can be just. The only justice will be that no minority is to prevail upon any other."<sup>90</sup> Lyotard

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<sup>90</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.96.

agrees - "one does risk falling back into a sort of indifferentism." The two are debating whether or not a "politics of opinion" can be regulated by the Kantian Idea, a maximization of the concept. This regulation need not detain us, for Lyotard does not pursue it himself. It is a vestige of the need to justify or ground assertions, and one senses throughout *Just Gaming* Lyotard's uneasiness with this attempt to do so. He spends much time discussing the game of the just, a game in which one listens, and he will pursue the implications of this game in *The Differend*.

#### **v: The humility-Text**

Although Lyotard asserts that listening is one of the most important features of paganism, he abandons paganism in *The Differend*, and so one might wonder what becomes of listening. It is possible to make a case for the importance of listening in *The Differend*, even though the word does not appear once in the book. To make this case, we must use the category of the Text, as given to us by Barthes. For Barthes, a Text is something produced or set alight; it cannot be named or fixed. It is that series of volant echoes from work to work, from work to subject and back. The Text forms during reading and thus has the character of the event - which should come as no surprise, for Barthes' appreciation of the event is surely as keen as Lyotard's. "The time of the enunciation is the present," Barthes wrote in "From Work to Text," "and every Text is written here and now." Laying its evanescent spoor across the boundaries of "great works" the Text is certainly one of the most mischievous manifestations of social and cultural thought.

In the next chapter, we will try to pick up the trail of Lyotard's *humility-Text*: not merely a Text about humility, but a series of hints, slippages and mutterings that taken together help us to imagine an ethically valuable form of humility based around listening. Lyotard does not offer a theory in the same way Habermas does, he does not say "Do this to be humble," or "It is good to listen because . . ." Rather, he seeks to show what happens when we listen, what possibilities are opened up by listening. The humility-Text is really the range of associations and possibilities that enter the head of the reader when dealing with *The Differend*, and these associations and possibilities are released only because Lyotard refuses to gain time, or to succeed. We turn now to an examination of *The Differend*, and of the humility-Text that surrounds it like a cloud.

## CHAPTER TWO

### i: The Differend

Any reader who is used to locating and extracting the marrow of the books s/he reads will be disappointed, frustrated and confused by *The Differend*. This is not because it is an absurd or foolish book, but because it denies us the exercise of habits to which we may be accustomed, not the least of which is paraphrase. Lyotard begins *The Differend* with a "Reading Dossier," a series of notes on the book that form a preface of sorts. The notes have headings like "Title," "Thesis," "Stakes," "Genre," etc. Lyotard remarks that "the present reading dossier will allow the reader, if the fancy grabs him or her, to 'talk about the book' without having read it."<sup>91</sup> And is this not what a preface should do? Should it not provide the reader with a sketch, with a condensation, of the book? Normally, yes; but Lyotard rejects this initial offering typical of so many works. He refuses to have his book "gain time," that is, be a success, just as he rejects the success of a book that sells well. Lyotard is not interested in this kind of success. Writing about himself in the third person, he tells us:

[the author] will never know whether or not the phrases happen to arrive at their destination, and by hypothesis, he must not know it. He knows only that this ignorance is the ultimate resistance that the event can oppose to the accountable or countable use of time.<sup>92</sup>

Lyotard's ignorance about where the phrases in *The Differend* are going, and what they

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<sup>91</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.xiv.

<sup>92</sup> Lyotard, p.xiv.

will do, is comparable to the reader's befuddlement about what those phrases mean. In the case of the reader, the event is the reading of the book, and the book is written so that an accountable use of time is impossible: One could not say "I got a, b and c out of *The Differend* today, and tomorrow I will get x, y and z." The importance, and the strangeness, of the refusal to submit to paraphrase shown by *The Differend* will be ever more evident as we progress through this essay. For now, we will try to pick up the initial mutterings of the humility-Text.

## ii: A Review

In the second chapter of *Just Gaming*, Lyotard stresses the importance, in paganism, of listening. As a pagan, one listens before one speaks, and speaks as a listener rather than as an author. In the fourth chapter of *Just Gaming*, Lyotard roughs out a "casuistry of the imagination" or a method for judging that makes no use of concepts. Lyotard deals most fully with obligation in this chapter, and it is the chapter that is most Levinasian in tone. Lyotard explains to Thébaud that there is a certain way to consider prescriptives that is shared by the Sophists and the Hasidim. Prescriptives are looked upon by both with humour, and there is with both a refinement in the notion of what the prescriptive is:

One does not find [with the Hasidim] all the massive character of commands, but, on the contrary, the effort to become ever more sensitive to the strange property that a statement of command is not a statement that can be deduced. And it is only at the cost of such a

sensitization that one will slowly realize that what is important in this language game is obligation as a pragmatic relation and not as content.<sup>93</sup>

There are times, in other words, when we must discern that we are being spoken to. What is being said to us is not as important as the event of that saying, that addressing. There are times when we must appreciate our status as addressees.

Lyotard later affirms the importance of such appreciation: "For us, a language game is first and foremost someone talking. *But there are language games in which the important thing is to listen*, in which the rule deals with audition. Such a game is the game of the just."<sup>94</sup> The game of the just, or prescriptive game, is characterized by a very specific transcendence: the addressor pole is vacant, the addressee does not know who (or what) prescribes, only that something has been prescribed. "[The] prescriptive utterance comes from nothing: its pragmatic virtue of obligation results from neither its content nor its utterer."<sup>95</sup> The prescription falls in upon the addressee like a surprise. If, in the prescriptive game, the addressee knows who the addressor is, s/he can put her- or himself in the place of the addressor, and take on the mantle of the prescriber. The addressee could paraphrase the prescription and thus contain it, in which case it loses its force as a prescription. The prescriptive game is marked by an asymmetry between addressor and addressee, which makes the relation ethical, because the addressee is always "less than" the addressor, always humbled, confused,

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<sup>93</sup> Jean-François Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, trans Wlad Godzich, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.65.

<sup>94</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, pp.71-72, my emphasis.

<sup>95</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.72.

wondering, prevented from thinking the apprehending thought and, according to Levinas, summoned to obligation<sup>96</sup>. The addressee is humbled by the prescriptive game, which humbling makes the game ethical. *Listening* is ethical. But by listening, Lyotard means something very specific, and not the apprehension of another's verbal content, which we might first take it to be.

### iii: The Differend, The Phrase

*The Differend* contains few prescriptions.<sup>97</sup> But at the end of the second chapter, "The Referent, The Name," Lyotard asserts that "the historian must break with the monopoly over history granted to the cognitive regimen of phrases, and he or she must venture forth by lending his or her ear to what is not presentable under the rules of knowledge."<sup>98</sup> This passage is one of the most significant slippages in the book. Lyotard tells us that the historian must lend an ear. He or she must leave the safety of the cognitive regimen. But what historian does Lyotard mean? What regimen is the cognitive? Why should this passage be a slippage, and a scandal? Why is it different from the other phrases in *The Differend*? Answering these questions will take time. We must explain what the differend is, and then discuss a paradigmatic example of the differend for Lyotard, the dispute between Holocaust deportees and "revisionist"

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<sup>96</sup> Levinas says that the face, the corporeal manifestation of the Other, "summons me to my obligations and judges me." See Emmanuel Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p.215.

<sup>97</sup> According to Lyotard, *The Differend's* genre is philosophical: the rules governing its order and structure may only be found after reading, not before.

<sup>98</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.57.



historians who claim that there is no factual evidence that the Holocaust actually occurred. By doing this, we sketch the contours of the humility-Text, and also come to see the centrality of Levinas's thought in Lyotard's writing. Some might object: surely it is Kant whose thought suffuses Lyotard's writing more than any other thinker, especially in *Just Gaming* and *The Differend*. In a certain way, this is true, for Lyotard refers to Kant more than any other thinker. But this only means that Kant is the most prominent *referent* of Lyotard's "pile of phrases." We hope to show here that Levinas is its *sense*.

"The differend," writes Lyotard, "signals this inability to prove." What inability is this? It is the inability to show and to name. The differend is a dispute between two parties that is regulated or conducted in the idiom of one of the parties; the other party is left without the means to signal that a wrong has been done to it. A differend could be a dispute between any two genres of discourse (as language games are renamed in *The Differend*); but in *The Differend* Lyotard identifies the cognitive genre (which requires naming and showing) as particularly rapacious and smothering. In this genre, one secures legitimation through description. It is the genre of proof and of mastery, and also of perspective, in which one surveys a field and identifies the real and necessary within it: "*That's it, it's over there, it's called . . .*": this is the exemplary cognitive utterance for Lyotard.

Lyotard is keen to distinguish the differend from the litigation. A litigation is a dispute in which both parties argue in the same idiom; any court case is, ideally, a litigation: a lawsuit, for instance, in which an accident victim seeks financial

compensation from a negligent car company. No matter what injuries the victim of the accident has sustained, physical or emotional, he or she agrees that a certain amount of money will make up for the damage done. Thus do the plaintiff and the defendant speak in the same idiom, a legal-economic idiom. But what if the damage cannot be translated? What if no compensation is possible?<sup>99</sup> What if one has suffered a damage that cannot be communicated? This one then has a problem, and is in a double bind: "either the damages you complain about never took place, and your testimony is false; or else they took place, and since you are able to testify to them, it is not a wrong that has been done to you, but merely damage, and your testimony is still false."<sup>100</sup>

Not a wrong but "merely" a damage? Isn't this somewhat callous? Lyotard explains what he means by *wrong*: "a damage accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage."<sup>101</sup> Now, we must be clear about what is at stake here, about the level at which Lyotard conducts his analysis. *The Differend* is subtitled "Phrases in Dispute," and for Lyotard, phrases do battle, not subjects or their intentions. "It is not the thinking or reflective I that withstands universal doubt, it is time and the phrase."<sup>102</sup> "For there to be no phrase is impossible, for there to be an *And a phrase* is necessary. It is necessary to make linkage. This is not an obligation . . . but a

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<sup>99</sup> Allen Dunn, in a reading of *The Differend* that is at times quite perceptive, argues that just compensation is one of the stakes in resolving differends. But one wonders how Holocaust deportees could be "compensated" for their stay at Auschwitz . . . . See Allen Dunn, "A Tyranny of Justice: The Ethics of Lyotard's Differend." *boundary 2*, 20:1, (Spring, 1993): 192-220.

<sup>100</sup> Lyotard, p.5.

<sup>101</sup> Lyotard, p.59.

<sup>102</sup> Lyotard, p.59.

necessity. To link is necessary, how to link is not."<sup>103</sup> The phrase is the unit of analysis in which Lyotard enucleates the *event*. Phrases do not have to be linguistic: Lyotard gives the example of a cat raising its tail. The phrase does not describe (unless it is a descriptive phrase), the phrase is what gets described - but by another phrase. The phrase presents. It does not occur within a context, but activates context. It is not the expression of a will, "a desire of language to accomplish itself. But merely that something takes place."<sup>104</sup>

In an interview in *Diacritics*, Lyotard admitted that the language game, as presented in *Just Gaming*, was freighted with a "human" significance he preferred to avoid. He rejected the notion of the language game as a "toolbox" into which subjects might dip to find implements to carry out their intentions. The phrase prevents this possible slippage. It is the enunciation as a happening or event, and not as meaning, truth, intention or expression. Lyotard wanted to give language games this kind of status in *Just Gaming*: as he said of the prescriptive game, "to understand what a prescription or an obligation is, the pole of the sender must be neutralized. Only if it is neutralized will one become sensitive, not to what it is, not to the reason why it says what it says, not even to what it says, but to the fact that it prescribes or obligates."<sup>105</sup> Lyotard clearly wants to strip the language game of its presence, but by maintaining the notion of language game, he cannot: it is recalcitrant in its telos.

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<sup>103</sup> Lyotard, p.66.

<sup>104</sup> Lyotard, p.75.

<sup>105</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.71.

The phrase solves this problem. It is an atom of discourse, so basic and specific as to be banal. The phrase is simply what takes place. For Lyotard, this is not so simple, because when any phrase takes place, it presents its pragmatic poles: addressor, addressee, referent, sense. One of these poles may be occulted; Lyotard gives the example *I saw it*, for which no addressee is indicated. The phrase places or presents subjects, makes them what they are: they speak, or are spoken to, or are spoken about. The phrase, in fact, bears some resemblance to the statement, Foucault's basic unit of analysis in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. As Foucault points out, "If a proposition, a sentence, a group of signs can be called "statement," . . . it is because the position of the subject can be assigned."<sup>106</sup> For both the phrase and the statement, it is the event of enunciation that is considered first; the subject is considered as an *effect* of this event. In both cases, the concern is not with meaning, but with the conditions under which it emerges.

Another similarity: the phrase and the statement are both singular, since both are governed by temporality. "The presentation entailed by a phrase is forgotten by it," Lyotard tells us, "plunged into the river Lethe . . . Another phrase pulls it back out and presents it, oblivious to the presentation that it itself entails."<sup>107</sup> A phrase is itself, but the same phrase presented is in fact another phrase, and so on. Each phrase is singular, apparent reappearances merely an effect of the cognitive genre, the genre of ostension. Foucault tells us that "a statement exists outside of any possibility of

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<sup>106</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, (New York: Pantheon, 1972), p.95.

<sup>107</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.77.

reappearing."<sup>108</sup> This emphasis on singularity is a refusal, on the part of both thinkers, of a totality that guarantees phrases or statements a place in a larger order. Foucault is more succinct about this: in his discussion of rarity, he notes that there are gaps between statements, that they have no tendrils reaching back to a common source. He refuses to think of a group of statements as "a plethora of signifying elements in relation to [a] single signified."<sup>109</sup> For Lyotard, as we move from phrase to phrase (or, in *Just Gaming*, from language game to language game), *worlds change*: the addressee of one phrase is the referent in the next. Lyotard shares with Foucault a refusal to force the things that are said into a sessile relation with concepts, grand themes, narratives, or any other sluggish presence.

It is not so clear, though, that he shares with Foucault the same reasons for this refusal. Foucault, almost entirely and quite implacably, banishes the subject from his analysis. In *The Archaeology*, the statement is described as a function "that has a bearing on a group of signs." It is not so much a thing as it is the condition for the emergence of that thing outside of any intention or desire. Foucault seeks the location of the statement in the discursive field, and wants to understand its functioning:

The referential of the statement forms the place, the condition, the field of emergence, the authority to differentiate between individuals and objects, states of things and relations that are brought into play by the statement itself; it defines the possibilities of appearance and

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<sup>108</sup> Foucault, p.89.

<sup>109</sup> Foucault, p.118.

delimitation of that which gives meaning to the sentence, a value as truth to the proposition. It is this group that characterizes the *enunciative* level of the formulation, in contrast to its grammatical and logical levels."<sup>110</sup>

Lyotard would approve of Foucault's differentiation between levels, but he might also find Foucault's analysis and discussion of the statement too positivistic, too much an effect of the cognitive genre. Lyotard's phrase does not have a "function;" one detects in Lyotard's writing a desire to simply let things be. This is not quietism, for as Lyotard's dense analyses of the cognitive, speculative and narrative genres show<sup>111</sup>, we rarely let things be, we often trouble them with interpretations, readings and relocations. Whether or not Lyotard might "agree" with Foucault's analysis of the statement is another matter. But there is certainly this crucial difference between the statement and the phrase, despite their similarities: the statement is more strategic than the phrase, it is more clearly defined as an analytical category. The phrase, by contrast, is flecked with humanism, and with (as we will see when we look more closely at Lyotard's relationship to Levinas) a strongly phenomenological character that is quite different from the utilitarian character of the statement. The phrase is more benignly defined than the statement, it is less imbued with power, it obeys no laws or rules. It is not governed by any regularities. By defining the statement, Foucault defines a *structure*, couching attributes like freedom, intention and personality. The

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<sup>110</sup> Foucault, p.91.

<sup>111</sup> These analyses correspond, in *The Differend*, to the chapters entitled "The Referent, The Name," "Result," and "The Sign of History."

phrase is considerably less determined, and might thus seem banal or inconsequential. In a way, it is, for it is just what happens. Pulling out a chair so that someone can sit down is a phrase, and so is purposely not returning a phone call from a long-winded acquaintance. So what is the importance of the phrase? Why would Lyotard want to use it to discuss the differend?

Phrases can be marshalled by certain *linkages* of one onto another into genres of discourse, such as the cognitive. Every linkage entails a differend, because for the phrase that is linked, others were not. An event happens, but other events could have happened. "To link is necessary, but how to link is not." Terror emerges from the struggle over how to link; into this struggle, Lyotard introduces the *Is it happening?*, the openness to events, the refusal to foreclose, to describe, to say "What you're really saying is . . ." As Lyotard tells us, "The wrong is still in anticipating [the phrase], that is, in prohibiting it."<sup>12</sup> Lyotard wants, as we said earlier, to keep things open; but this is not as easy as it might seem, nor as banal.

#### **iv: The Need for Vigilance**

If the victim of a differend is indeed in a double bind, how are we to detect the differend? Lyotard answers this question with recourse to the *feeling*:

The differend is the unstable state and instance of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be . . .

This state is signalled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling: "One

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<sup>12</sup> Lyotard, p.85.

cannot find the words," etc. A lot of searching must be done to find new rules for forming and linking phrases that are able to express the differend disclosed by the feeling, unless one wants this differend to be smothered right away in a litigation and for the alarm sounded by the feeling to have been useless.<sup>113</sup>

"Feeling" indexes interiority; here is a clean break with the poststructuralism of Foucault. There is a distinctly "human" flavour to the passage quoted above, and something "human" as well about the entire project of finding new idioms for differends. It is almost as though Lyotard is being pulled in two directions: in *The Differend's* preface, he asserts that one of the book's stakes is to disabuse the reader of the notion that language is a tool in the service of man, which man uses to attain his ends, or to carry out his will. Such an assertion is clearly in the key of poststructuralism. But Lyotard also tells us that "to give the differend its due is to institute new addressees, new addressors, new significations and new referents in order for the wrong to find an expression and for the plaintiff to cease being a victim." "A new competence must be found." "Every wrong ought to be able to be put into phrases." "In the differend, something "asks" to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away."<sup>114</sup> This is a very "human" or, really, humane, account of the differend.

The notion that every differend should be able to be resolved by the invention

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<sup>113</sup> Lyotard, p.13.

<sup>114</sup> Lyotard, p.13.



of new idioms has been astutely criticized by Allen Dunn in his article "A Tyranny of Justice: The Ethics of Lyotard's Differend."<sup>115</sup> Dunn asserts that the differend is not a "strong" category for the analysis of conflict because Lyotard's account of the differend necessarily depends on the systems of normative morality it critiques, since, Dunn argues, it would be impossible to even begin to detect a differend without some intimation that a wrong had been done and thus without some idiom, a publicly understood and debatable idiom, in which that wrong could be expressed. "[The] terms in which the differend is described," Dunn tells us, "revive the very cognitive systems that the differend protests."<sup>116</sup> Dunn notes a paradox in the notion of the differend: "The differend can only be understood as an intensification of, an improvement upon, the very language that it indicts . . . It combines a cry for a possible justice with a resistance in principle to all judicial mediation."<sup>117</sup>

Lyotard asserts that "to give the differend its due is to institute [new pragmatic positions] in order for the wrong to find an expression."<sup>118</sup> Following Dunn, though, might we not ask how a new addressee, or addressor, or referent would express a wrong which had previously lain dormant? Why would a new competence be any better than an old one? Who would recognize this new competence? In whose eyes would the victim cease to be a victim? By finding idioms for differends, don't we risk

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<sup>115</sup> Allen Dunn, "A Tyranny of Justice: The Ethics of Lyotard's Differend," *boundary 2*, 20:1 (Spring, 1993):pp.192-220.

<sup>116</sup> Dunn, p.197.

<sup>117</sup> Dunn, p.197.

<sup>118</sup> Lyotard, p.13.

turning them into litigations, and smothering what was specific about each differend? The invention of new idioms means nothing if no one listens to them. Let us imagine that Holocaust deportees invent an idiom in which to signify done to them by the revisionists. Why would this new idiom be any more acceptable than an old one? More importantly, if this new idiom of the deportees were accepted, on whose terms would it be accepted? Why should it be the job of the deportees to invent a new idiom that the revisionists will accept and listen to? To demand this means to push the deportees into a possible rapprochement with the cognitive genre, which the revisionists already speak.

Lyotard wants no such rapprochement, and Dunn should know this from his reading of *The Differend*. Lyotard affirms that the task is to find an idiom for the wronged party in a differend. How would we go about finding this idiom? Perhaps in the same way we might find a lost wallet: by looking carefully for it. Lyotard is only caught up in a paradox if we assume, like Dunn does, that he wants to turn every difference into a moment of the same. This is not the case. If our task is to *find* a new idiom, it is not our powers of invention that must be marshalled, but our vigilance. Lyotard says that a new competence is needed, but it may be that a new *incompetence* - the ability to not speak and listen for previously unheard idioms - is required.<sup>119</sup> We may need to un-find (i.e., it is unfounded) and old competence. If this is true, then the subject having the feeling is not the victim, but another person - a witness, or possibly

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<sup>119</sup> Gemma Corradi Fiumara comments on the relationship between listening and incompetence: "Listening actually impoverishes us from a 'rational' point of view because if we seriously engage in paying heed we may even come to a state of helplessness and disorientation." See Gemma Corradi Fiumara, *The Other Side of Language: A Philosophy of Listening*, (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 43.

even the victimizer - and the alarm is truly alarming: it is a warning that something bad and destructive is about to happen. Fortunately for the rest of this essay, Lyotard recognizes that this may be so, that what is needed is not a new way to speak, but a new way not-to-speak: a new way to listen.

**v: The Differend with the "Revisionists": Against the Cognitive Genre**

*The Differend* starts with a discussion of the differend between Holocaust deportees and "revisionist" historians. Lyotard points out that the problem facing the deportees is that they have no way to prove that the gas chambers actually did what Holocaust survivors claim they did. The only evidence acceptable to the "revisionists" is an eyewitness account of the gas chambers in action - which is of course impossible, since to have seen the chambers at work is to have died inside them. The deportees protest the "revisionists'" arguments: You are wrong, they say, the gas chambers did exist, and were used for mass murder. They are plaintiffs, but "the plaintiff becomes a victim when no presentation is possible of the wrong he or she says he or she has suffered."<sup>120</sup>

As the deportees become victims because of lack of proof, so do the "revisionists" become plaintiffs. Their complaint is that they and, by extension, the rest of the world and "History", are being deceived by the claims of the deportees. As plaintiffs, the "revisionists" are responsible "for establishing the existence of their

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<sup>120</sup> Lyotard, p.8.

referent,"<sup>121</sup> as Lyotard says all plaintiffs must be. But while the referent which the deportees had to produce was existence of the gas chambers, the referent for the "revisionists" is simply a lack of proof; they are responsible for establishing a negative rather than a positive. They are pseudo-plaintiffs because the reality for which they are responsible is the negative they produced as defendants before the complaint of the deportees.

But Lyotard thinks that there is another way to consider the complaint of the "revisionists". The "revisionists" reject the claims of the deportees through use of the cognitive regimen. Proof needs to be shown and named, and it cannot be. And the "revisionists" are "correct" under the rules of this regimen. Of the name "Auschwitz," Lyotard notes, "the 'revisionist' historians understand as applicable to this name only the cognitive rules for the establishment of historical reality and for the validation of its sense. If justice consisted solely in respecting these rules, they could not be accused of a denial of justice."<sup>122</sup> But Lyotard demurs. He writes about the "silence imposed on knowledge [i.e., the cognitive]" which follows from a lack of quantitative proof that there was a genocide, and says of the "revisionists":

That [the "revisionists"] are not worried by the scope of the very silence they use as an argument in their plea, by this does one recognize a wrong done to the sign that is this silence and to the phrases that it invokes. They will say that history is not made of feelings, and that it is

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<sup>121</sup> Lyotard, p.8.

<sup>122</sup> Lyotard, p.57.

necessary to establish the facts. But, with Auschwitz, something new has happened in history.<sup>123</sup>

Lyotard accepts silence as a sign, that is, as an event - a phrase. It is not simply an absence opposed to the plenitude produced by cognition, an irrationality opposed to the good sense produced by knowledge. For the historian, lack of proof is the end of the story, and the silence following this lack is no different from any other. "[But] the common person has a complex feeling, the one aroused by the negative presentation of the indeterminate."<sup>124</sup> The common person takes silence as a phrase, as something - a sign pointing to incompleteness and uncertainty. The sign indicates that something "cannot be phrased in the accepted idioms." Lyotard continues:

That, in a phrase universe, the referent be situated as a sign has as a corollary that in this same universe the addressee is situated like *someone who is affected*, and that the sense is situated like an unresolved problem, an enigma perhaps, a mystery, or a paradox.<sup>125</sup>

The addressee is affected; he or she has a feeling. Do we ascribe to this feeling the caprice of subjectivity? Are we simply to take the feeling as a mistake, something to be ignored or overcome? Lyotard says no: the feeling is a signal, it raises an alarm. Something cannot be "phrased in the accepted idioms." Does that mean it needs to be translated into the accepted idioms? Or, conversely, *does it mean that those affected*

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<sup>123</sup> Lyotard, p.57.

<sup>124</sup> Lyotard, p.56.

<sup>125</sup> Lyotard, p.57, my emphasis.

*must attend to the unaccepted idioms?* Is it in the nature of the enigma, the mystery or the paradox to be solved, or to stand as challenges to cognition? Surely Lyotard has these questions in mind when he asserts that "the historian must break with the monopoly over history granted to the cognitive regimen of phrases, and he or she must venture forth by lending his or her ear to what is not presentable under the rules of knowledge."<sup>126</sup> The historian must listen, but not to content; the "revisionists" already "know" what the deportees have to say. Rather, the historian must open him- or herself to the *pragmatic demands* of other regimens. This is the way that Lyotard wants all ways of speaking to circulate, as was asserted in the first chapter. Ways of speaking, language games - in *The Differend*, phrases and genres - cannot circulate as content. They are events - even silence is an event - and they make demands on subjectivity, personhood, and wholeness, demands that may impugn professional standing or credibility, or even personal belief and conviction. And if such demands seem not simply mistaken, but counterintuitive and even wrong, invitations to failure, it is only because they are, at their heart, Levinasian and not Lyotardian demands.

The great power of the cognitive genre is that there are already many places where "what is not presentable under the rules of knowledge" has nonetheless made an appearance: *The Drowned and the Saved*, for instance. But this is not proof. It may be a plea, or a memoir, or a cry for justice, but it cannot bear on "reality." Indeed, Lyotard might argue that, where the differend between the deportees and the "revisionists" is concerned, "plea", "memoir", and "cry for justice" are all deictic

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<sup>126</sup> Lyotard, p.57.

markers in the cognitive regimen: "*The Drowned and the Saved?* It's over there, in the autobiography section." The pluralism of which Lyotard is accused by Eagleton mummifies these regimens which appear as moments of the cognitive, and circulates them as goods. But Lyotard instructs the historian to lend an ear and not a voice. He asks the historian, not to bear witness to the differend, but to witness the differend, to listen and not to speak. He asks for the silence that allows other regimens to be heard, that respects the *Is it happening?* - that allows other regimens to circulate as themselves, and not as examples furnishing a regime of positivism with all the proof it needs of its benevolence towards "other voices."

Under the cognitive regimen, there exists no proof that the gas chambers existed. But other regimens produce in the addressee a feeling indicating uncertainty, which Lyotard thinks points us towards openness. "The alternative is not: either the signification that learning establishes, or absurdity."<sup>127</sup> (E.F. Schumacher: "[M]atters that are beyond doubt are, in a sense, dead; they constitute no challenge to the living.") What would normally pass as absurdity and a waste of time - "I don't know, I can't prove it." - is for Lyotard an orientation towards the *Is it happening?*, towards an undetermined possibility which nonetheless must occur. Thus is Lyotard able to warn: "In and around names, vengeance is always on the prowl."<sup>128</sup>

And so the feeling may not signal, as Lyotard first suggests, the need to speak, to put something into phrases, but the need to listen, to grant already-spoken phrases

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<sup>127</sup> Lyotard, p.58.

<sup>128</sup> Lyotard, p.56.

(already spoken because one deportee, somewhere, has already said "We were at Auschwitz. There were gas chambers there. Many people died.") some legitimacy by acting as witnesses for them. Lyotard says that the silence imposed by Auschwitz is a sign for the common person; the silence imposed on the historian may be a sign for all of us. Faced with the enigma, the mystery, the paradox, our inclination may be to stay silent. These refusers of sense do not lend themselves to phrasing, and to be silent in front of them is not to deny them, as the cognitive genre might say, but to make them real by one's presence.

#### vi: A Clarification

The importance of listening had already been established, in rough form, in *Just Gaming*. Lyotard tells Thébaud that "for us, a language game is first and foremost someone talking,"<sup>129</sup> whereas the pole of the addressee, as Lyotard calls it, the position of the listener, is often occulted. But in some language games, we are told, the important thing is to listen. The prescriptive game, or the game of the just, is one of these games. Lyotard's foregrounding of the game of the just is consonant with his suggestion in *The Differend* that the historian lend an ear to regimens other than the cognitive. But between *Just Gaming* and *The Differend*, there is a change or refinement in what "listening" means. In *Just Gaming*, and especially in the fourth chapter, listening is aligned closely with evaluating and considering, with the weighing of possibilities: it is contaminated by another game, the game of judgement. In *The*

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<sup>129</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.71.



*Differend*, listening goes under the name of obligation, and is specifically a game in which one listens; Lyotard refines the act of listening to respect its pragmatic specificity.

In *Just Gaming*, we are told that one must be suspicious of prescriptions: "They are not always to be taken literally, and they may result in the most extreme injustice . . . they always refer one back to responsibility, to the responsibility of listening, of lending oneself to obligation."<sup>130</sup> One must employ a "casuistry of the imagination," one must imagine what the effects of obeying a prescription will be, rather than naively taking the prescription as the expression of an unspoken good. Lyotard argues for this casuistry because it breaks with the versions of justice he earlier rejected, the model and the autonomous legislator. However, two language games are being confused: the game of obligation is mixed up with (not identical to) the game of judgement. In the game of obligation, something is asked of the addressee. Actually, what is asked is that something is asked, the prescription is that there be prescriptions. In this game, one is pragmatically a listener, and the speaker, as we have already seen, remains unknown. The listener cannot know the speaker, because if s/he did, s/he could understand what was being asked of her or him. But it is the role of the listener in the game of obligation to listen, not to understand.

None of this makes any sense (and is not, as Lyotard says it is in *Just Gaming*, properly Levinasian) if the listener reflects on what is said and judges it. Such judgement keeps the subject in what Levinas calls the primacy of the same -

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<sup>130</sup> Lyotard and Thébaud, p.66.

solipsism. Lyotard is "right" inasmuch as his casuistry of the imagination rejects a pre-determined, ontologized or thematized justice, but it does not respect what is specific about obligation, about receiving a request from a requester who cannot be understood. The specificity is in the *humbling* brought about by the request. If the request passes through the subject's judgement about its validity, what emerges cannot be considered just. If Ernst Zundel is asked by Canadian Jews to stop his campaign denying the Holocaust, it is no problem for him to say that he thinks their request is a trap and that it could result in injustice. It is no problem for him to say that he listened to them.

In short, *listening* is more than , and is in fact opposite to, *knowing what was said*. Listening must be understood, like so much else in Lyotard's writing, as an event. It is not something we did, but something that happens to us. We must now look at how Lyotard refines the game of obligation to give listening its due.

#### **vii: Lyotard and Levinas**

Lyotard's humility-Text reaches a crisis point in *The Differend's* Levinas Notice. Throughout the book are Notices, "reading notes for philosophical texts," and in the Notice on Levinas, Lyotard refines the game of listening - obligation - to resolve the aporias its presentation presented in *Just Gaming*. In doing so, however, Lyotard also does an injustice to Levinas, because he does not deal with the central Levinasian category of the face. Lyotard begins the Notice by discussing "the scandal of obligation," which arises when the ego discovers that there is something unavailable

to the will. Lyotard adumbrates for us Levinas's thought on the relationship between the ego and the other: traditionally, the ego has been able to claim all others for its own, as components of its experience. "The other is its [the ego's] other." As Levinas puts it, "the ego remains the same by making out of disparate and diverse events a history - its history."<sup>131</sup> The other is reduced to the same in traditional Western thought. But ethics requires that the other befall the ego. The ego cannot grasp this befalling:

The ego is tempted to explain [the befalling of the other] as a formation within its domain of constitution and experience. It is tempted to know and it is tempted by knowledge. But the other, as an exteriority whose reason does not lie within the ego, announces the insufficiency of knowledge. The other announces no sense, it is the announcement, the non-sense.<sup>132</sup>

Western thought has been dominated since Plato by autonomy, by an ego that turns experiences into its experience. Heteronomy breaks with this homogenizing drive, questioning both the freedom of the subject and that subject's ability to know. It is the experience of Infinity and is a "social relationship," according to Levinas. In this relationship, the Other resists the ego and "puts into question the naive right of [its] powers."<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), p.48.

<sup>132</sup> Lyotard, *The Differend*, p.110.

<sup>133</sup> Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," p.55.

Liotard grafts this account of the ego's inexplicable experience of the other onto discourse pragmatics; he "transcribes" it. The scandal of obligation results from "the ego's expulsion from the addressor instance, from which it managed its work of enjoyment, power and cognition. It is the scandal of an I displaced onto the you instance. The I turned you tries to repossess itself through the understanding of what dispossesses it."<sup>134</sup> Ego and other are not equivalent terms.<sup>135</sup> There is an imbalanced or asymmetrical relationship between them. The ego runs afoul of its own desire to know, to make sense of events; confused, it stands powerless before the claim made by the other, before the request or address of the other. I becomes you, and you can only listen. "Such is the universe of the ethical phrase: an I stripped of the illusion of being the addressor of phrases, grabbed hold of upon the addressee instance, incomprehensibly."<sup>136</sup>

"The appearing of the other is not an event of cognition," Lyotard informs us. "But it is an event of feeling."<sup>137</sup> For the third time, we encounter this word feeling in *The Differend*. The first was when we looked at Lyotard's definition of the differend: according to him, the differend was disclosed by a feeling, but he had little to say

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<sup>134</sup> Lyotard, p.110.

<sup>135</sup> In his essay "Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited," Richard Bernstein argues that the notion of the Other is incomprehensible if it remains entirely unknown. Ego and Other have a mutual responsibility to understand and respect each other. But the Other in Levinas's thought *suffers*, and is thus barely capable, as Elaine Scarry points out in *The Body in Pain*, of cognizing. The relationship is and remains asymmetrical. See Richard J. Bernstein, "Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited," in *The New Constellation: The Ethical/Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, (Cambridge,UK: Polity Press, 1991), pp.57-78.

<sup>136</sup> Lyotard, p.111.

<sup>137</sup> Lyotard, p.110.

about the quality of the feeling: "One cannot find the words." Next, Lyotard told us that the silence encountered by the revisionist historian, and which this latter took as a lack of proof, was for the common person a sign: "the common person has a complex feeling, the one aroused by the negative presentation of the indeterminate." The referent - silence - is a sign and affects rather than informs the common person. Finally, Lyotard tells us that the experience of the other, an experience in which we are sapped of our cognition, in which our ability to understand, to form a coherent narrative, to even speak, is erased, is "an event of feeling." As we move from one appearance of *feeling* to the next, it takes on greater gravity, as though Lyotard were revealing to us the awesome dimensions of something that initially appeared as an intuition - trifling, "feminine," irrational. It would be overdetermining things to assert that Lyotard is trying to tell a story about the feeling. But it does seem clear that, as one moves through *The Differend's* labyrinthine passages, the feeling takes on greater importance as a category for understanding Lyotard's writing.

There are echoes between "the game of the just" from *Just Gaming*, a game in which the most important thing is to listen, and Lyotard's transcription of the encounter with the other into pragmatic terms, in which the I is turned into a you, the speaker is *made* into a listener. We might wonder why it is just to listen is such a case; what makes the position of the listener an ethical one? Gradually, an aporia emerges. Under Lyotard's transcription, the condition for a scandal of obligation is an I turned you. To make clear the nature of the prescriptive, its immediacy, Lyotard quotes the Levinas of the Four Talmudic Lectures:

"They did before they harkened," Levinas writes: "The incomparable character of an event such as the giving of the Tora [is that] one accepts it before knowing it [ . . . ]. The doing in question is not simply the praxis opposed to the theory, but a way of actualizing without beginning with the possible [ . . . ]. They act before they harken! [ . . . ] To hear a voice speaking to you is ipso facto to accept the obligation of the one who speaks." (1968a: 91,95,98,104-5)

Liotard immediately comments:

This immediacy is to be compared with the immediacy of the performative phrase. I say *The meeting is open* or *War is declared*, and so they are. I hear: *Hail*, and I am the angel's obligee, the you of the other.<sup>138</sup>

The question must be asked: Is the immediacy of the performative phrase, of *The meeting is open*, comparable to the effect of the phrases Levinas discusses in Lyotard's quotation? Levinas says that "the doing in question" is a "way of actualizing without beginning with the possible." Is this true when someone says "The meeting is open"? Is it true for every, or any, performative phrase? For any prescriptive phrase? Or, on the other hand, is *to act before they harken* an index for something much greater than a linguistic call? In short, is Lyotard too reductive in his transcription of the ego's encounter with the other?

This last question requires our utmost attention. For, if Lyotard is reductive,

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<sup>138</sup> Lyotard, p.III.

this means he is leaving something out of his account of the ego's experience of the other. It is not enough, in this case, simply to hear a call in order for an I to become you. This is why soldiers go to boot camp: to learn how to take orders. There is a precondition, or another condition, which accompanies the humbling Lyotard adumbrates. He appropriates the effect of the humbling - the scandal - with no attention to the event. We must now consider this event of humbling that Lyotard, in the Levinas Notice, thematizes by passing over the central experience of this event, according to Emmanuel Levinas: the experience of the face.

#### **viii: The Responsibility to the Other**

For Levinas, Western philosophy follows the example of Plato in pursuing the primacy of the same. But this pursuit is confounded by the experience of the Other, an experience which discloses to the ego the infinite within itself, and which is prompted by the face (a human, corporeal face) that resists assimilation:

The exteriority of the infinite being is manifested in the absolute resistance which by its apparition, its epiphany, it opposes to all my powers. Its epiphany is not simply the apparition of a form in the light, sensible or intelligible, but already this *no* cast to powers; its logos is:

"You shall not kill."<sup>139</sup>

According to Levinas, the face calls the ego to responsibility by not doing violence to the ego, which is called to respond to the face in a distinctly non-psychological way.

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<sup>139</sup> Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," p.55.

The face is not a theme to be understood, but a presence to be reckoned with. This encounter definitively establishes *reason*. There is no melodrama of dispossession in this account, nor any recourse to a mystical experience. Levinas is clear: "The other is not for reason a scandal which launches it into dialectical movement, but the first rational teaching, the condition for all teaching."<sup>140</sup> The encounter with the face does not lead to non-sense, as Lyotard asserts, but to a most profound sense. "The face in which the other . . . presents himself does not negate the same . . . It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial. This presentation is preeminently non-violence, for instead of offending my freedom, it calls it to responsibility and founds it."<sup>141</sup>

There is not violence or a scandal, but there is a demand made, and an opposition presented, by the face. "The face is not a force. It is an authority."<sup>142</sup> It does not make, and win, an argument, nor does it overwhelm, but rather demands in its frailty : "The infinite paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenceless eyes."<sup>143</sup> The face does not appear as a representation, but as being, and must be understood as radical alterity. It is not another species in the same genus as

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<sup>140</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), p.203.

<sup>141</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.203.

<sup>142</sup> Tamra Wright, Peter Hughes and Alison Ainley, "The Paradox of Morality: An Interview with Emmanuel Levinas," trans. Andrew Benjamin and Tamra Wright, in *The Provocation of Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, (New York: Routledge, 1988), p.169.

<sup>143</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.199.



the ego, but "absolute difference," which is established by language:

In discourse the divergence that inevitably opens between the Other as my theme and the Other as my interlocutor, emancipated from the theme that seemed a moment to hold him, *forthwith contests the meaning I ascribe to my interlocutor*. The formal structure of language thereby announces the ethical inviolability of the Other.<sup>144</sup>

Levinas has never hesitated to identify himself as a phenomenologist, and he acknowledges the influence of both Husserl and Heidegger on his thought. For him, the core of phenomenological thinking is an understanding that human experience is not some self-transparent substance or pure cogito; it is always intending or tending towards something in the world that preoccupies it.<sup>145</sup> Of Husserl, Levinas says:

Phenomenology was his method of responding by means of rigorous and exact descriptions of our intentional modes of consciousness.

Phenomenology was thus a way of suspending our preconceptions and prejudices in order to disclose how essential truth and meaning are generated.<sup>146</sup>

Now, it is well known that later thinkers, particularly Foucault, take phenomenology to task for the presumption that preconceptions can be suspended, and that intentionality is the hallmark of consciousness. As Foucault said of

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<sup>144</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p.195, my emphasis.

<sup>145</sup> Emmanuel Levinas and Richard Kearney, "Dialogue," in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Richard Cohen, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p.14.

<sup>146</sup> Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue," p.16.

phenomenology and of the thinkers he believes are opposed to it:

Phenomenology tries to grasp the significance of daily experience in order to reaffirm the fundamental character of the subject, . . . of its transcendental functions. On the contrary, experience according to Nietzsche, Blanchot and Bataille has rather the task of "tearing" the subject from itself in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely "other" than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation.<sup>147</sup>

Using phenomenology, Levinas also tries to tear the subject away from itself, by pushing to their limits the claims phenomenology makes about the perceiving subject. The subject turns its intentionality towards the other, and finds there something that undoes its intentionality: the face that speaks and the fact of language.

By transcribing Levinas's account of the face into pragmatic terms, Lyotard injects an non-humanist tincture into Levinas's thought. It is no longer the face, but the prescriptive or performative phrase that secures obligation: I hear *The meeting is open*, and so it is. As we will see, it is possible for a phrase to secure a (quasi) obligation, though it is not the performative phrase that does so. And if the phrase can do so, it is only because the event, so crucial in Lyotard's discussion of the language game and of the differend, has a strongly *phenomenological* character that derives from Levinas's discussion of the face. We have already seen that, for Levinas, "the ethical inviolability of the Other" is indicated by "the formal structure of language." By this

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<sup>147</sup> Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*, trans. R. James Goldstein and James Gascaito, (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p.31.

formal structure, Levinas means something other than the rules of grammar and syntax; he means something closer to pragmatics. "The beginning of language is in the face," he tells us, and language is thus first and foremost - as it will later be for Lyotard - the fact of language, its happening, not signs but saying. And so, when Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity* of an *essence* of language, he does not mean a horizon behind which there is a guaranteed kernel of meaning, a base to expression's superstructure. Rather, he means

this function of language prior to all disclosure of being and its cold splendour [which] permits us to extract language from subjection to a preexistent thought, where it would have but the servile function of translating that preexistent thought on the outside, or of universalizing its interior movements.

Levinas continues, refusing, as Lyotard later does, the true-false distinction in ethics.

The presentation of the face is not true, for the true refers to the non-true, its eternal contemporary, and ineluctably meets with the smile and silence of the sceptic. The presentation of being in the face does not leave any logical place for its contradictory.<sup>148</sup>

But we must be wary here, because Levinas obviously means something very specific by essence or even phenomenology, and certainly not the naive belief that experience is constituted in the "fully-present subject." For Levinas, there is only a fully present, i.e., responsible, subject once he or she has had what Levinas designates as experience.

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<sup>148</sup> Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, pp. 200-201.

"The idea of infinity," Levinas tells us, "in which being overflows the idea, in which the other overflows the same, breaks with the inward play of the soul and alone deserves the name experience, *a relationship with the exterior*."<sup>149</sup> Lyotard alters the nature of the relationship to the exterior in his discussion of Levinas, because his object of criticism is the cognitive genre. For Lyotard, the experience of the other is an experience of pure confusion, and any subsequent cognition by the subject who has this experience is a return to the cognitive genre and thus to the primacy of the same. Levinas is more measured and careful, and at the same time not as inflexible. For him, the encounter with the Other inaugurates a taking on of responsibility, a banishing of the moral selfishness of the ego, and a staying of one's actions in an effort to protect the other. Thus is Levinas able to affirm that ethics is radically opposed to ontology or "the struggle to be." He continues, "Ethics is therefore *against nature* because it forbids the murderousness of my natural will to put my own existence first."<sup>150</sup> Lyotard thinks it is enough to be addressed to be called to obligation, but this may not be so. The experience of the face is not the same as the experience of being addressed and of being turned into a *you* (although, in Levinas, the former contains the latter).

### **ix: The Possibility of an Ethical Genre**

Let us sum up. Lyotard thinks that genres of discourse such as the cognitive and the speculative do not respect the *Is it happening?*, the openness to the

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<sup>149</sup> Levinas, "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity," p.56, my emphasis.

<sup>150</sup> Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue," p.24.

occurrence. These genres try to get the last word, or at least the next word, so that others genres are stifled. When the cognitive genre establishes, for instance, that *Sandinista* denotes *communist*, a closure results, not least because, under the rules of cognition, it has already been decided what communist is. The genre of obligation prevents such foreclosure, because it stops the ego from speaking, it turns the I into a you, and you listen. The you who listens cannot pre-dict, that is, speak in advance of the event and undermine it. In the genre of obligation, the subject is humbled and silenced. Lyotard thinks that the genre of obligation is like any other, presenting an addressor and an addressee, and a referent as well (there are obligations.).

We also saw, however, that Lyotard does not make use of the Levinasian category of the face, and asked whether his failure to do so puts his genre of obligation in jeopardy. How can there be obligation without those phenomena that brings it about? Could there not be another phenomenon with the same, or with a commensurate, or even just an analogous authority? If there is, then the absence of the face in Lyotard's discussion of obligation cuts two ways. It can be thought of as a weakness, or as the opening of another door. For could it not be argued that Lyotard seeks, at the level of phrases, of mediated relations, of discourse in all its manifestations, a phenomenon with a function comparable to the face's in interpersonal relations? If Lyotard is seeking such a phenomenon, his work takes on an importance for media studies that might not have been apparent at first, for genres of discourse are not merely genres of speaking. They may consist of non-verbal or visual phrases, of phrases that are seen on television, heard on the radio, or read in a book. For

instance, when Lyotard discusses the economic genre, the genre of exchange, he does not mean simply discussions among shopkeepers. An evaluative phrase such as "What a great band!" could easily take its place in the economic genre, spoken over a cell phone to a group of record executives at a meeting, as would a favourable record review.

It might be possible, in short, to think of genres of discourse as media, with the power to change experience from one form into another. Joyce Nelson makes such an argument in *The Perfect Machine*, where she points out the differences between the earliest television dramas of the 1950's, and the serials and sitcoms that followed. The first type of show was marked by psychological conflict; the characters in the shows wrestled with difficult problems, and this struggle was dramatized with close-up shots of the face, and long stretches of dialogue. These shows, Nelson argued, encouraged viewers to look inward, but since such self-reflection was politically dangerous, they were replaced with serials and sitcoms, in which there were few close-ups, in which the characters remained the same from week to week and in which any problems visited upon the characters came from outside, and were not part of their psychological make-up. Thus was the necessity for the character's self-reflection eliminated.<sup>151</sup>

Nelson argues that each type of show had distinct socio-political effects. What makes her argument convincing is that she does not look to the themes of each genre exclusively, but to the very nature of the genres, to their formal characteristics. Thus do genres of discourse act as media. Is there a mediated effect, or set of effects, that

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<sup>151</sup> See Joyce Nelson, *The Perfect Machine: TV in the Nuclear Age*, (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1987), pp.46-57.

has an effect on the subject analogous to the face's? In the Levinas Notice, Lyotard says that the I-turned-you is bereft of his powers of speech; "the arrival of the other suppresses me as the subject of an experience."<sup>152</sup> Are all media, all words, sounds, and images *for us*? Are all films and paintings meant to be understood and apprehended? If it is possible to make television programs that explain geopolitical conflict or municipal corruption, to make science textbooks that explain how the seasons change, or radio programs that make one feel good about being a Republican, is it also possible to make something that baffles, confuses, or beyond that, calls one to responsibility? Lyotard tells us that the phrases in the genre of obligation, or the ethical genre, are prescriptive phrases. But what if they were not? What if the phrases produced a sense of obligation without prescribing anything?

Lyotard tells us that ethics, like "folksongs" or "technology", is a genre. Every genre procures a success by linking one phrase onto another. In *The Differend*, we see how some modes of linking, like the cognitive or speculative, are privileged over others. These genres foreclose, and it is part of Lyotard's achievement to have examined them so carefully, to have been so clear about the ways that it can seem as though there is nothing left to say. "The wrong," he reminds us, "is still in anticipating [the phrase], that is, in prohibiting it."<sup>153</sup>

Lyotard is not very clear about what he means by genre. We are told that a genre is a concatenation of phrase regimens meant to pull off a success. The

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<sup>152</sup> Lyotard, p.113.

<sup>153</sup> Lyotard, p.85.

descriptive is a genre. So is the didactic. Lyotard wonders if ethics is a genre as well. He asks "if the ethical genre is the one whose rule is to admit no rule but that of obligation without conditions?"<sup>154</sup> How would this constitute a genre? The genre gets things done, it is meant to procure a success, though all successes are not the same. How can we speak of a success in ethics? Who succeeds? The addressor in the ethical genre is not known, according to Lyotard, because if it were, its claim could be assimilated by the addressee. The addressee is known, it is us, but we follow no rules of linkage. We are not given a choice in obligation, it falls in on us. It is a surprise, not always pleasant, a demand made upon one.<sup>155</sup> Lyotard wants ethics to be the genre in which things are suspended, and in which the *Is it happening?* is respected, but ethics is not subject to the prediction that other genres are; it is not a success, but a failure.

Ethics cannot be a genre in the same way that science or teaching could be a genre, because there is no success to speak of. There is only listening, which takes place inside the subject. Other genres can be described and classified as one might classify plants and animals, because these genres are positivities. Ethics is not. Lyotard clarifies what he means by success, acknowledging that "the gain hoped for by pedagogical discourse, by dialogue, by tragedy, by folksongs, by technology or by obligation is not the same." He points out "the stakes in the genre of ethics: its success

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<sup>154</sup> Lyotard, p.117.

<sup>155</sup> At one point in *The Differend*, Lyotard suggests that obligations take place at the level of genres: genres "obligate" one to do so and so to procure a success. But this obligation hardly seems forceful, since there is an isomorphism between what the genre obligates, and what the subject wants. Still too human...



(justice) would be the perfect disinterestedness of the ego, the relinquishing of its will."<sup>156</sup> What could possibly succeed in ethics? If one answers with some abstraction, like the genre itself, one simply constructs a repository for the success that would normally accrue to the human subject. A success has to be attributed to something - it is a category of the will.

The category of genre, in short, remains freighted with the humanist ballast Lyotard tried to ditch from the language game. When one talks about a success, one is talking about the human. The strategy for moving beyond the human, beyond will and intentionality, is not to ascribe human qualities to artifacts or ideas. It is to flirt with and embrace "the threat of *Ereignis*." Must we be confronted with a face to embrace this threat? Tentatively, the answer is no. There is a way to keep the occurrence in mind, but it is not what Lyotard calls a genre. He writes that genres of discourse are "modes of forgetting the nothingness, or of forgetting the occurrence, they fill up the void between phrases." Ethics reminds us of this void, it undercuts strategies for success, which makes it a threat. Ethics does not simply keep the occurrence in mind - that would be cognition - it is the occurrence. Is there a genre that fails? Is it ethics?

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<sup>156</sup> Lyotard, p.129.

## CHAPTER THREE

### i: Humility

In his attempt to describe an ethical genre derived from the philosophy of Levinas, Lyotard makes a two-fold movement away from that philosophy. First, he shifts ethics onto a linguistic terrain, and second, he specifies the type of phrase peculiar to ethics, the prescriptive or performative phrase. The request the face makes, however, might include, but is not dependent upon, discourse. Levinas has no trouble specifying where the request comes from: the defenceless eyes of the Other, the Other's suffering face. *The prescriptive or performative phrase is not the face*, and does not have the same ethical authority. *The meeting is open* does not qualify, even pragmatically, as a phrase with the same immediacy as the ethical phrase. The prescriptive turns an I into a you, but this change is not necessarily ethical. Lyotard says that the immediacy of the angel's *Hail* is comparable to the immediacy of *The meeting is open* or *War is declared*. These last two phrases, though, are not marked by immediacy. They require great mediation before they are binding. An angel saying "Hail!" and one's detested boss saying "The meeting is open" are enunciations of two vastly different orders.

Genres of discourse prescribe stakes: "you ought to link on like this in order to get to that."<sup>157</sup> This seems to me to be a very utilitarian, and somewhat naïve, way to think of the genre. People discover, all the time, that the steps they should take to achieve a goal lead them away from that goal; and conversely, they discover that the

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<sup>157</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.116.

things they are doing or saying lead to results they could not have anticipated. A teacher wants to teach her class about art, but her erudition and confidence seduce a young student. A boss wants to reprimand an errant employee, but his words compel the employee to quit the company and take up another career. The prescription might lead to a sense of obligation in the addressee, but another genre could compel this sense of obligation as well. This is precisely the possibility I want to explore in this chapter. It is rare that a prescriptive leads to the kind of humbling Lyotard describes in the Levinas Notice.

Lyotard is too cautious and narrow in his discussion of obligation and of the pragmatic arrangement that brings it about. He chooses the prescriptive phrase as an ethical phrase because, pragmatically, it places the I in the you position, but he pays a price for this reduction: he must turn his back on the *Is it happening?* I think it is possible to find another genre that respects the void between phrases, that, instead of linking one phrase to another, helps us to remember the moment between linkages. Such a genre would genuinely humble us, it would help us to remember our place, our humus or ground. The prescriptive game, in contrast, will lead only to subjection, and subjection is not the same thing as humility. A few words about the nature of humility are in order here.

Actually, I want to say a few more words about Levinas, who has a great deal to teach us about humility. For me, the most important part of Levinas's account of the face is his assertion that it calls the ego to responsibility. For some reason, many of Levinas's critics miss this. Richard Bernstein, for instance, attaches to Levinas's

philosophy a massive weight - the weight of absolute alterity.<sup>158</sup> In his essay, "Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited," Bernstein focuses exclusively on Levinas's insistence that the Other is radically other, arguing, with Derrida, that for ego and other to understand each other's alterity, there must be some kind of relationship between them.<sup>159</sup> Now, Bernstein is not "wrong"; the problem is that he does not deal with the *quality* of the face's alterity, simply with the fact that the alterity is absolute. The face's absolute alterity need not be its most important feature simply because it is the most notorious. In Levinas's philosophy, alterity is something you experience. Any comments on this philosophy turn it into something to think about, to understand and imagine. It is very easy to imagine radical alterity, to put what one imagines in concrete terms, and then reject this as unrealistic. Levinas comments on this:

[the utopian character of the ethical relation] does not prevent it from investing our everyday actions of generosity or goodwill towards the other: even the smallest and most commonplace gestures, such as saying "thank you" as we sit at the dinner table or walk through a door, bear witness to the ethical. This concern for the other remains utopian in the sense that it is always "out-of-place" (*u-topos*) in this world, always other than the "ways of the world"; but there are many examples of it in

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<sup>158</sup> See Richard J. Bernstein, "Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited," in *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991), pp.57-78. See also John Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

<sup>159</sup> See Bernstein, "Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited," pp. 68-74.

the world.<sup>160</sup>

The encounter with the Other is undoubtedly dramatic, but dramas come in different types. It is a drama, but it does not play itself out like a ragnarok of the ego.

Attaching a grand significance to Levinas's philosophy only delivers it back to ontology or, worse, theodicy. There is nothing worse than useless suffering, Levinas tells us, and much suffering is useless, that is, it has no use, it teaches no lesson, it is not ordained by any deity. The task is to strip suffering of its explanations - to explain suffering as divine will is theodicy - and face it as suffering. "For an ethical sensibility," Levinas writes, "the justification of the neighbour's pain is certainly the source of all immorality." He continues:

The for-the-other - the most upright relation to the Other - is the most profound adventure of subjectivity, its ultimate intimacy. But this intimacy can only be discreet. It could not be given as an example, or named as an edifying discourse. It could not be made a predication without being perverted.<sup>161</sup>

The truth of what Levinas is saying will be known by anyone who, passing a particularly diseased-looking panhandler on the street, is almost overcome by a sort of vertigo that one should have money and another none. This is not guilt. It is the revelation made possible by an encounter with the other. When it is thematized and reified as "radical alterity," this revelation is easily made to seem hyperbolic, but it is

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<sup>160</sup> Levinas and Kearney, "Dialogue," p.32.

<sup>161</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering", trans. Richard Cohen, in *The Provocation of Levinas*, eds. Robert Bernasconi and David Wood, (New York: Routledge, 1988), p.163.

an event and as such is not meant to be understood, but experienced. The experience of this revelation is, I think, humility.

If there is an ethical genre, a genre that genuinely humbles us, it may not be as dramatic and dispossessing as Lyotard seems to think it is in *The Differend*. The obligated subject, the I turned you, is for Lyotard bereft of knowledge, confused and "discombobulated." But perhaps the dispossession entailed by obligation does not have to be such a scandal. Perhaps it can be a teaching. In the last chapter, I suggested that Lyotard was searching for a mediated phenomenon - really, a medium - analogous to the face. This medium would, I believe, be at the centre of an ethical genre. It is, I will argue here, the poem. Like the face, the poem is destitute, a naked enunciation, and it calls us to a responsibility. The poem demands a frailty and a trust from the reader. The ethical genre is not the prescriptive, it is poetry, for poetry can genuinely show us our own place. I cannot prove this assertion, but I can tell a story about it.

## **ii: Poetry**

Before 1992, I had never paid close attention to poetry. I had read a fair amount, both in school and on my own, but it remained unknown to me, like a foreign country one hears about, but never visits. I had never felt as though I had any rapport with the medium, never felt as though I understood what poets were up to when they wrote poems. There were some I had studied in high school, like Whitman and Poe, who I had enjoyed, but others like Yeats and Pound confused me. I did not understand the references they made, and their syntax alienated me. They did not seem

particularly accessible.

In the summer of 1992, I went to Britain for five weeks, and spent a great deal of time travelling on the London subway cars where, among the ads serried above the commuters heads, there were cards with poems on them. The cards had been placed there by the Poetry on the Underground program, which was established in 1986 to give commuters something more interesting to read than cigarette ads. I was travelling with a friend, and we often faced long subway rides from one end of town to the other. Looking for distractions, I started reading the poems on the subway cars more carefully than I normally would. It was not unusual for a car to have had two or three cards placed in it, so there was plenty to read. I would read a poem once or twice. The car would come to a stop, passengers got on and off, and then I would read the poem several times more. In two weeks, I read more poetry more carefully than I had during eight years of university.

At some point during all this reading, I realized that I was reading in a way I normally did not. It is still tempting to call it close reading, since I was reading the poems very carefully, paying attention to each word and to the way the words were put together. But I was also reading receptively, that is, I allowed the associations brought on by the poem to enrich later readings of other poems, or even of the same poem. Receptive reading was particularly important. I found that poems generated images and associations that were not indicated precisely by the words in the poem. I did not imagine the flowers described by the poet, but my own version of them, my own experience of flowers. I realized that the poet did not have complete control over

the poem. Indeed, it seemed as though the poet relinquished control over the poem, gave up intentionality so that the poem might be free to do its work. The poet did not seek to control every effect. The more I thought about this, the more evident it became: for the reader to enter into a relationship with the poem, the writer had to give up the dream of ordering it to produce an effect. The poem contained an element beyond the control of the poet, an element that had to be out of the poet's reach, if it was to work.

I should note here two academic encounters I had had in the previous year that I now know helped me to articulate what was new about the way I was reading. The first encounter was with an essay by Bill Nichols about the film *The Nuer*, where he discusses what he calls "a formal strategy of 'making strange' in order that overlooked qualities of the everyday can be rediscovered."<sup>162</sup> The second encounter was with a classmate, a graphic designer, who commented in a class discussion on the fruitlessness of trying to produce a universal sign, the glyph that could be understood by everyone. Designers, she told us, had been trying for years, but a new way of thinking had recently emerged. She gave the example of a sign used in an airport to indicate to travellers where to leave their luggage. Under this new way of thinking about signage, the designer would not portray a universal, Platonic piece of luggage, but, for instance, a battered valise. Travellers would recognize this symbol more readily as "luggage" and thus more readily associate their own burdens with it.

Both Nichols and my classmate were arguing for placing limits on the text, for

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<sup>162</sup> Bill Nichols, *The Ideology of the Image: Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p.252.



making the text difficult and opaque rather than transparent. Limitations, distortions and confusions force us to do work of our own, and flatter our sense-making abilities. Many of the poems I read in London seemed to me quite limited; they were not expansive epics, but short fragments, quick, precise descriptions. They did not provide a meaning, but seemed to request a particular kind of attention. When this attention was brought to bear, a message was not disclosed, but a perception renewed. The poem was a tool for sharpening perception, stalling the reader and making things difficult so that he or she would be forced to attend to the fact of the poem, its presence, rather than its theme. The key to this discovery of the poem's potential is the way one reads it. The right kind of reading is crucial, a reading without interpretation, without interest. I learned this in 1992, but I know that many have known it since childhood, and have been willing to live with the uncertainties and difficulties the poem offers.

When I returned to Montreal, I took a vast selection of poetry out of the university library. Anthologies, best-of collections, chapbooks - I was indiscriminate, reading anything my eye or hand happened to rest on in the stacks. The method of reading I had learned served me well as I made my way through different styles and eras of poetry. Poems and poets that had previously seemed impenetrable now took on a new complexion. There was one poem by Auden that played a large role in enriching my understanding of the role of the reader. The poem is called "Autumn Song," and I liked it for several reasons: its tone was frustratingly enigmatic, its rhyming scheme - AABB - led the reader through the poem briskly, and its short

bursts of imagery were richly allusive. I read it over and over again, simply for the pleasure of reading.

Some time later, I read Seamus Heaney's essay on Auden<sup>163</sup>, in which he discusses Auden's early work, of which "Autumn Song" is a part. Heaney tells us that, according to Auden's close friend Christopher Isherwood, Auden composed poems that sounded good but meant nothing. He simply strung gnomic lines of equivalent meter together, producing poems like "Autumn Song." Heaney asks how this might change our view of the poem, and discusses his own early difficulties with Auden's work. At the end of his ruminations, he concludes:

What bothered and excluded me when I read [Auden's early work] as an undergraduate still excludes me but bothers me no more. The difference is that I am now content that Auden should practice such resistance to the reader's expectations; I take pleasure in its opacity and am ready to accept its obscurity - even if it is wilful - as a symptom of this poet's deliberate insistence upon the distance between art and life.<sup>164</sup>

It is only a cavil that Heaney attaches a meaning to Auden's wilful obscurity. What is crucial is Heaney's divorce of the writer's work and the reader's work. There is no encoding/decoding, but two different kinds of involvement in, or meditations on, language. Heaney's priority is the experience of the work. He provides strong evidence that Auden was pulling a prank, but does not use it to convict Auden of fraud, thereby

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<sup>163</sup> Seamus Heaney, "Sounding Auden," in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and other Critical Writings*, (New York: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp 109-128.

<sup>164</sup> Heaney, p. 121.

staving off the threat posed by his own lack of mastery. He trusts the poetry rather than its author.

At about the same time that I was looking into "Autumn Song," I started reading Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In that book, Foucault wanted to shift attention from the document to the monument, from the expressive text to the opaque text. He wanted to sever the connection between an enunciation and the horizon or source that guaranteed its meaning, i.e., the subject. The enunciation was to be studied in its positivity, exteriority and rarity. Foucault refused to treat the enunciation as a symptom of the play of inwardness, and there was a strong consonance between his treatment of the enunciation and Heaney's treatment of early poems of Auden's such as "Autumn Song." In both cases, the text is treated as a presence, and its effects are considered independently of an author or creator.

Foucault thought that his analysis would upset a great many people who thought that interiority and enunciation were closely related, writing "I have deprived the sovereignty of the subject of the exclusive and instantaneous right to [discourse]." Heaney, though, seemed to have no trouble with this, both as a reader and as a poet. In another essay, Heaney compares the poet to an antenna, receiving signals which he or she then broadcasts to the rest of us. As I learned, Heaney was one of a number of poets who welcomed and cherished the discontinuity of their selves, and there seems to me no question that their relationship to language, in each case, is a humble one. The relationship that the poet has to language can be seen as a *positive* version of the dispossession Foucault seeks in *The Archaeology*. Foucault said that he wanted to use

discontinuity as a "working concept" rather than as "an external condition that must be reduced." Poets beat Foucault to this goal, however: the poem can only be understood apart from the poet. To be a poem, it had to leave the place it was made, and enter into many other relationships, unexpected and perhaps not the ones the poet desired or had in mind. As the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz says, in the last stanzas of *Ars Poetica?*:

The purpose of poetry is to remind us  
how difficult it is to remain just one person,  
for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,  
and invisible guests come in and out at will.

What I'm saying here is not, I agree, poetry,  
as poems should be written rarely and reluctantly,  
under unbearable duress and only with the hope  
that good spirits, not evil ones, choose us for their instrument.<sup>165</sup>

### iii: W.S. Graham

Few poets are as acutely aware of their discontinuity with the poems they write as the Scottish poet W.S. Graham. This awareness is not Graham's theme, it is his tone, or his tonality. Graham writes often of being "on the other side of the words" or

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<sup>165</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, *Bells in Winter*, trans. Czeslaw Milosz and Lillian Vallee, (New York: The Ecco Press, 1978), p.30.

"on the other side of language." He starts his long poem "The Dark Dialogues" with three lines: "I always meant to only/Language swings away/Further before me." There is a space in the text after these lines, and then Graham continues, giving the palpable impression of pausing, stopping and starting without complete certainty. Graham asks questions that he cannot answer, and continues in a quiet voice:

And who are you and by  
What right do I waylay  
You where you go there  
Happy enough striking  
Your hobnail in the dark?  
Believe me I would ask  
Forgiveness but who  
Would I ask forgiveness from?<sup>166</sup>

One of the most productive tensions in Graham's poetry is between, on the one hand, his content - his ruminations on the space between writer and reader; his knowledge that he is writing to be read at a distance rather than heard immediately - and on the other hand, his voice: distinctive, intimate, hesitating, reflective, riddling, and entirely present in the writing. It is as though the reader is being addressed by someone at a campfire, or in a dark living room late at night. Nowhere is this tension more apparent

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<sup>166</sup> W.S. Graham, *Selected Poems*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), pp.55-63.

than in Graham's poem "The Beast in the Space." Ostensibly, the beast is the poem, and the space is the space between Graham and his readers. But this is to thematize the event of reading the poem. The beast "pads and sniffs between us. Now/It comes and laps my meaning up." "Get away," he tells the beast, "to whoever it is will have you." For two stanzas, Graham writes about this beast, what it is and what it does. At times, it sounds almost as if he is writing children's verse. The third and last stanza is different. It begins:

He's gone and if he's gone to you  
That's fair enough. For on this side  
Of the words it's late. The heavy moth  
Bangs on the pane. The whole house  
Is sleeping and I remember  
I am not here, only the space  
I sent the terrible beast across.

It is late in the evening for Graham, and insects are trying to get into his house. This is a signature Graham technique; in the midst of ruminations about the nature of language, or about his wife or friends, he inserts a small, vivid detail that instantly places Graham elsewhere, since we imagine our own version of Graham's surroundings, and see it is not where we are, and also distances the poem from Graham, because the line has a life of its own. It is not true, it simply is. The line that

describes Graham's distance from us simultaneously distances itself from Graham, and takes on its own life. This line, and others like it, make up the "beast" in the poem, and the beast of the poem, which Graham instructs us to treat in the following manner:

Watch. He bites. Listen gently  
To any song he snorts or growls  
And give him food. He means neither  
Well or ill towards you. Above  
All, shut up. Give him your love.<sup>167</sup>

Graham's instructions are to be applied to the very instructions he gives. The content of the poem is its structure, and vice versa. The beast means neither well or ill; it is indifferent in precisely the same way I would argue that "Autumn Song" is. It is not yoked to the poet's intention, it is not trained or servile. Graham knows his ability to bring joy and harm to the reader is limited, but the poem might be able to do this. The reader has a task, to give the poem his or her love, and before that, to be quiet, to not trouble the poem with talk. The poem, as Graham sees it, is entirely analogous to the face in Levinas's thought, not least because both poem and face mean "neither well or ill;" neither gives, but both ask for something. The poem is vulnerable to the reader, and does not seek to efface its status as enunciation.

Graham's earliest poetry bears a strong resemblance to the work of Dylan

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<sup>167</sup> Graham, *Selected Poems*, pp.48-49.

Thomas, full of baroque, awkward wording. His later poetry is marked by the memory of these early efforts, and speaks in an idiom slightly different from our own, alien enough to hold one's attention. There is a tone of slight unfamiliarity in Graham's work, and it asks of us a collaboration, not so that Graham's meaning may be recovered, but so that our own may come to light. How can a mood or a tone ask something of us? How can the tonality of a poem make a request? I think it calls us to attention, which we direct not only at the poem, but at ourselves as well. Tonality is not an embellishment; it is one of the poem's most crucial and satisfying effects.

#### **iv: Trust**

I want to make clear what conclusions I have reached about poetry ever since my first significant encounter with it in 1992. I learned first that one must read the poem in a very particular way, a receptive way. With this way of reading, one does not search for a meaning, but rather allows the images and associations engendered by the poem some space to emerge and assert themselves in the reader's interiority. By giving these images and associations such an opportunity. I think the reader's own perception is made more sensitive. The second thing I learned, and it is closely linked to the first, is that the poem, when it is read in a receptive way, takes on a particular autonomy. It slips loose from the grip of the poet and become's, in a sense, the reader's work. This is another way of saying that the poem is activated every time it is read, that every reading is a singular *event* that brings the poem - Graham's beast - to life. As the poem slips loose from the poet, he or she is not effaced, but placed as a



subject. Here is the poem, one might say, and there is the poet: two distinct things sharing in some reality. The third thing I learned is that the poet employs certain tactics to give the poem its autonomy; this is a remarkable paradox, in which the will builds something it knows will eventually move beyond its compass. By using strange and difficult syntax, abrupt changes in tone, rhyming and metering, and other techniques, the poet ends up distancing him- or herself from the poem. Or, more accurately, the poem comes into its own presence. Each of these conclusions is a facet of the same intuition: that the poem is a presence, an enunciation to be dealt with when it is read or heard, and not a message to be decoded or understood. The poem, in short, is analogous to the face; it is, in the world of mediated relations, what the face is in the world of interpersonal relations.

Even as I write this, I realize that such a comparison is too simplistic, for interpersonal relations are shot through with our experiences of the media, and are often conducted, for years, with the aid of different media. Perhaps it is better to say that the attention demanded by the face, because it is a face, a suffering face, could be demanded by other things. Just as the face does, the poem calls us to responsibility for itself. The poem is not to be understood as the expression, or related to the intentions, of an author, just as the face is not to be converted into a theme, or its suffering explained as the will of another power.

The poem, then, calls us to response-ability, to the ability to respond. This ability is a receptivity and openness, an acceptance of things as they are. This is not passivity; we rarely want things to be what they are. We want them to be something

else: a theme, currency for us to spend in conversations, at job interviews, in essays and articles. To let something be what it is requires a discipline, a set of skills, as Heaney has already shown us. It is easy to forget that Heaney is writing about Auden's early works as a middle-aged man; he first encountered the poems like "Autumn Song" during his college days. It is remarkable that he has attended to Auden's work for this long. He shows a great deal of patience, not towards the poem, but towards his own relationship to it, towards his own self, in a way. He is willing to ponder, he is not eager to draw conclusions about "Autumn Song." He seems happy to have had the time to reflect on this gnomic utterance of Auden's.

Heaney also shows a good measure of trust in his efforts to understand his relationship to Auden's work. As we have already seen he has it on good authority - Isherwood's - that much of Auden's poetry was not only composed with no specific intent, but composed as experiments in sonority. "Autumn Song" is not the proverbial "well-wrought urn," the carefully built utterance even the smallest details of which contribute to the genius and beauty of the whole. Heaney's relationship to Auden's poetry is considerably riskier than a more orthodox interpreter's might be. This only makes sense for, as we know, the greater the trust involved in a relationship, the greater the risk in maintaining it. The reasons that Heaney might have for maintaining this relationship are not as important as the direction in which he points his trust: not towards Auden, or even Auden's poetry, but to his own relationship to the poem.

Trust is risky because we suffer damages when it is broken. Many of us have been asked for money by panhandlers; I travel a lot by bus, and I am quite often

approached by people who tell me they need bus fare to get home to visit family or friends. I rarely have enough money for a fare, but quite often I do not give any money because I am worried that the person asking for it will spend it on booze or drugs instead of bus fare. By giving the money, one risks losing it for no "good reason." One might be accused of being a soft touch for passing the money over, of being sentimental, but it is perhaps worth noting that the word *feeling* in *The Differend*, the centrality of which we have already seen in Lyotard's thought, is translated from the French word *sentiment*. Heaney's conclusions about Auden's poetry stem from his feelings about this poetry. What bothered and excluded him earlier "excludes me but *bothers me no more*." This seems to me to be a somewhat novel, perhaps idiosyncratic conclusion to reach. Heaney is not talking about a meaning in the poem that he has uncovered, thus turning his back on exegesis, but a feeling about the poem with which he has made peace. By recognizing that Auden's poetry "excludes me but bothers me no more," Heaney is surely displaying a refined and deeply felt humility.

#### **v: Tonality and Linkage**

It would be far too mechanistic to assert that humility is produced by the poem. It is better to say that the poem complements, or resonates with, the humility of the subject. How is this possible? I think it is because the poem, in its tonality, mimes the subject's humility. I wrote earlier that tonality is one of the poem's most crucial and satisfying effects. It is not simply an embellishment. A poet does not simply write

about war, here with a carefree tone, and there with a sombre tone. Rather, the tone suffuses the work as it is read, and helps to determine what I would call its ethical character.

I think that many of the difficulties faced by media critics and analysts, or by anyone trying to make sense of their experience of the media, are caused by the difficulties inherent in describing, discussing or even perceiving the tonality of a work or text. The work of critics like John Fiske, who seeks "oppositional readings" of mainstream television programs, is guided by a hidebound empiricism that seeks "proof" of viewer's resistance or active participation. Sometimes it seems as though media criticism is incapable of making its points without such proof.<sup>168</sup> Do they really produce oppositional "readings" or try to figure out how the narrative of a show "works"? I have doubts about this; it seems to me that the moods evoked in us by tonality have as great, if not a greater, bearing on our experience of the media.

Tonality arises from what Lyotard calls linkage: not the meaning of a medium's content, but the way its elements are arranged and linked together. Lyotard makes it clear that for every genre of discourse, there are appropriate linkages. If we take a step back to *Just Gaming*, though, and to Lyotard's paganism, we see that it is our task to

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<sup>168</sup> See, for instance, Brad Chisholm's article "Difficult Viewing: The Pleasures of Complex Screen Narratives," in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (8:4, December 1991: 389-403), where the author provides a catalogue of narrative difficulties that the television viewer negotiates to construct a coherent narrative. How does Chisholm know this? The answer is that he does not, and could not. A better-known example of the empiricism I am talking about is Constance Penley's article "Brownian Motion," in which the author points to a vibrant underground culture of gay sex fanzines based on *Star Trek* characters as evidence of an "oppositional" strategy. Penley's example is suitably racy and "cool", but is no more oppositional than the thoughts that might run through anyone's head during an episode of *Star Trek*. These latter, unfortunately, rarely see the proverbial light of day. See Constance Penley, "Brownian Motion: Women, Tactics, and Technology," in *Technoculture*, Constance Penley and Andrew Ross, editors, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 135-161.

invent new moves, or, new linkages. There is no question that linkage is a central concept in Lyotard's writing. When I discussed earlier W.S. Graham's poetry, I was discussing the linkages within it, the way one phrase follows another, the way Graham leaves silences between lines. These linkages produce the feelings associated with Graham's poetry.

It is not only in poetry that linkages produce feelings, but in almost any medium one chooses. I saw this particularly clearly about three years ago, when I was analyzing newspaper coverage from the Milwaukee *Sentinel* of the Wisconsin spearfishing dispute, at the centre of which were the state's six Chippewa bands, and which was at its most febrile and violent, it seemed from the news coverage, in the late 1980's. I had never been to Wisconsin to witness these disputes first hand, but I had read enough about them to gauge when news reports about them were one-sided or partisan. Analysis of newspaper reporting is often fairly easy, since it is usually a matter of pointing out what could have been added to the stories to make them more balanced.

When I came to the *Sentinel* editorials commenting on the dispute I was faced with a different challenge. Editorials are not reporting, they are commentary, and are thus not subject to the same standards as front-page stories. I found that the editorials were just as partisan or unbalanced as the reportage could be, but I could not say why with the same precision. In an essay I wrote at the time, I noted that the editorials had a conversational tone. I was following the work of Ericson, Baranek and Chan in

*Visualizing Deviance*<sup>169</sup>, arguing that reportage on the spearfishing dispute consistently presented spearing as a deviant activity, opposing it to the normal, and not very clearly defined practice of hook-and-line (i.e., white) anglers. The editorials presented spearing as deviant as well, but they did this by establishing a "mood" of centrism, rather than by establishing the "facts" of a deviant spearing practice. The tone of the editorials was reminiscent of a reasonable co-worker's, arguing with one on the way to work, or over lunch. For instance: "In the long term, the controversy over spearfishing is but a sideshow to the greater problem of building the Chippewa economy in the North and bringing the bands into the economic mainstream." Fifty years from now, this statement may turn out to be "true", that is, the spearfishing dispute may indeed prove to be a small matter in the history of Native American affairs (though I doubt it). However, it does not seem to me to be enough to say that the editorial trivializes the dispute, because there is associated with it - there was when I read it - a feeling of frustration and anger at this trivialization, and it is these feelings that I think are of greatest relevance in understanding the "effects" of the editorials.

The key, of course, was to develop a way to show how the editorials produced a sense of frustration and anger, but this was not a simple task. I found it very difficult to say why I was frustrated and angry. I certainly tried, but my analyses were tedious and pedantic.<sup>170</sup> I argued, for instance, that a semi-colon instead of a period

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<sup>169</sup> See Richard Ericson, Patricia M. Baranek, Janet B.L. Chan, *Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987).

<sup>170</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet writes of the American "revisionist" Butz: "Ought one to refute Butz? It would be possible, of course, and even easy, assuming one knew the archives, but it would be long and tedious. As was just observed with a few precise examples, to demolish a discourse takes time and

produced a certain effect. The more I tried to understand what it was that upset me about the editorials, the more these things, these "factors", slipped through my hands, and I was left analyzing the editorials with what now seems an absurd and unserviceable degree of precision.

So it may be with my discussion of Graham's poetry in the present work. "There are many genres of discourse whose rules for linking are not stated," Lyotard writes. Does that mean we must discover these rules on our own? Or does it mean that there are no rules for linkage? I think it is the latter. In this case, the event takes precedence. What rules, for instance, was Mark Rothko following when he painted, in 1949, the first works of his mature style? If we call these works "canonical" now, does this mean we have rules to arrive at similarly remarkable works? I hope not.

"A linkage may reveal an equivocalness in the previous phrase," writes Lyotard, but he throws into relief, with this comment, an equivocation of his own. Is the linkage between two phrases uttered by the same addressor, or between a phrase from one addressor and a phrase from another, who was the addressee of the first phrase? To make this concrete: what linkage is most important: the one between two phrases in Graham's poetry, or the one between his poetry and my comments on it? A detailed discussion of linkage is well beyond the scope of this paper, not least because Lyotard is not very clear, in *The Differend*, about what linkage is and how it functions.

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space. When a fictitious account is well prepared, it does not contain elements allowing one to destroy it on strictly internal grounds." (51) He later says of an anti-Dreyfus pamphlet, "All its formulations (or almost all) were not inaccurate; it was the whole alone that was mendacious."(54) See Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Assassins of Memory: Essays on the Denial of the Holocaust*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

As to the matter of "where" linkage actually occurs, we can turn once again to Heaney for some clarity. Heaney's coming-to-terms with Auden's poetry is, to me, a good linkage, because it does not try to foreclose. Heaney does not look for meanings, he does not isolate and interpret every image of the work. But this is only possible because Auden's linkages in poems like "Autumn Song" - the way he puts one line after another, the ambiguity of his images, the rhyming scheme he uses - are themselves good linkages; Auden's poem will not submit to denotation, and this freedom of (from) meaning makes it possible, in certain instances, such as Heaney's, to reflect on the poem itself, to shift one's gaze from some point past the poem, as though one were looking over its shoulder, to the poem itself.

An ethical genre, in short, lets one link onto it *in an ethical manner*. By its linkages, the ethical genre offers what Levinas calls in another context an open hand, a welcome. By contrast, the unethical genre offers no such welcome; its work of communicating is done even before it (properly) starts. No good linkage is possible onto the phrases of this genre. It offers what Guy Debord calls "the unilateral conclusion."

#### **vi: Blue Skies: Clarifying the Differend**

Lyotard is right to call the differend "the unstable state and instant of language." By doing so, he points to the temporal nature of the feeling - how it is not a guaranteed effect, but arises without warning in the subject while he or she is having an experience. The differend is the result of certain linkages, not ideas or messages.



This is why differends arise from the disputes between phrases, quanta of the event, and not between subjects. To put it simply: an "ethical" subject, someone who we have decided can do no wrong - say, Gandhi - might utter an unethical phrase. Gandhi can do no wrong, but his phrases might. There is a great temptation to consider the differend as merely a re-mapping onto a linguistic terrain of existing power relations. Lyotard notes at the start of *The Differend*, though, that "what is subject to threats is not an identifiable individual, but the ability to speak or keep quiet. This ability is threatened with destruction."<sup>171</sup> Lyotard's desire to keep the "human" out of his ethical analyses is excoriated by Allen Dunn as a paradoxical and unsound gesture. Dunn has his doubts about the centrality of the phrase in Lyotard's work. He argues that, if it is only the phrase that suffers threats, there is no point in talking about struggle:

Lyotard fails to reconcile his insistence that the differend is the product of a purely linguistic incommensurability that cannot be referred to any prior structures of consciousness or intention with his claim that the differend is shaped by struggle, frustration, and suffering . . . . the language of struggle remains intentional and teleological; it cannot be generated from simple systematic incommensurability.<sup>172</sup>

The problem with Dunn's argument is that Lyotard does not see the clash between phrases in purely "systematic" terms. Just because the phrase is not "human" does not mean it is completely inhuman. Dunn reveals more about his own cast of thinking than

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<sup>171</sup> Lyotard, p.11.

<sup>172</sup> Dunn, "A Tyranny of Judgement: The Ethics of Lyotard's Differend," p.197.

he does about Lyotard's by lunging for a default category of "systematic" at the first sign of the non-"human". Phrases have a will, or, more accurately, phrases mime *by their linkages* the will, desires and intentions of subjects - of us.

We must avoid thinking of the differend in terms of existing power relations. There is certainly a differend between, say, Native Americans who want their ancestor's bones back, and the museums which study those bones and want to keep them. But there are also differends where one would normally not expect to find them, and the victims in these differends might be those who we would normally not think of as victims. Moreover, the victimizers (or victimizing phrases) in a differend might be phrases that, ostensibly, seem benign or even just and ethical. In an essay about his teaching methods, the American poet William Stafford discusses what kinds of encouragement he appreciated as a student and, in turn, what kinds of feedback he learned to give:

All sorts of things have helped me. People are harmonious, so a lot of it has been people. But it hasn't been the formal approval of people. Maybe it's been the unwilling, grudging lifting of an eyebrow when they are hit by something. That is better than someone who is going to encourage you. That's poison. Encouragement signifies that someone has a program that they have already arrived at for doing something for you. I try to get away from that in my teaching . . . I would rather be envious of my students than encouraging them.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> William Stafford, *You Must Revise Your Life*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986), p.65.

Throughout the collection of essays from which this passage is drawn, *You Must Revise Your Life*, Stafford repeatedly affirms his refusal to give not only criticism, but encouragement and praise. He acknowledges that this is not always a popular way to teach classes; it makes marking very difficult, for one thing. However, he would rather have an engagement with the work than make comments on it. Indeed, I would argue that Stafford has pushed the consequences of what I earlier called response-ability to their limits. By doing so, he discards something, encouragement, that many might consider to be one of the cornerstones of good teaching. Lyotard would say that Stafford has a great respect for the *Is it happening?*, and is trying to avoid differends. (Lyotard might also say that Stafford is coddling the event, though I doubt it. See *The Differend*, p.142, paragraph 202.)

Watching out for differends means something different than watching out for what we would normally call oppression or injustice. When Lyotard says that he does not want to refer the differend to "human" struggles, he is saying that he wants to avoid reifying injustice and the unethical as concepts, or models to which any suspect phenomena may be compared. I witnessed the problems involved in just such a reification about three years ago. I was spending the week-end at the Blue Skies folk festival, which was held on several acres of rolling forest and grassland near Clarendon, Ontario, about an hour's drive east of Ottawa. The organizers set up what was in essence a small town: there were campsites, a recycling centre, a large kitchen/dining area, a large main stage, and numerous common areas. The whole setting was quite relaxing and halcyon: people wandered around visiting each other's

campsites, playing guitars, swimming, chatting, doing laundry.

There were also many workshops and seminars scheduled, such as "Herbal Cooking for Lifelong Health" and "The Men's Healing Circle." I chose the more down-to-earth sounding "Strategies for Social Change." This seminar was led by a good-looking young man named Chris, who introduced himself as a writer and activist from Toronto. He wanted to give his seminar on methods for living a more just life, for conserving more. Things sounded somewhat promising. Chris then asked us to introduce ourselves. It took some time to do this, because a number of people went on about their backgrounds in union organizing, labour activism, various agitation and political mischief-making for longer than normal. As it turned out, a number of the seminar participants seemed better qualified to lead the seminar than Chris did. Something in his manner showed that he knew this, but he bravely continued.

The next hour was spent discussing the usual topics; the problem with capitalism, alternative housing (one discussion revolved around the viability of houses made out of straw), recycling, latter-day barter systems, etc. The discussion eventually wound down, and Chris asked if there were any more questions. I raised my hand. We had each received a single-page outline of Chris's talk, and it included a list of "Things You Can Do." Among such nebulous suggestions as "Recycle" and "Support Sustainable Initiatives" was a very specific one: "Throw Away Your TV." I asked Chris why he had included such a specific injunction amongst so many general ones. A number of the other participants, sensing a pro-TV opinion in their midst, pounced. I was told what a pernicious influence TV was on young people, that all TV producers

were venal jackals, interested only in profits and not in truth, and that TV supported a capitalist hegemony.

Fair enough, I thought; everyone is entitled to their opinion. I didn't want to get into an argument about TV, since I had actually asked Chris a fairly specific question about his outline (to which he never responded). And then, whoever was talking paused for breath, and a young woman at the periphery of the group took the opportunity to speak up. She told us she worked for a video production company in Montreal, and that she disagreed with much of what had just been said. Not only did she think that TV had something to offer viewers but that, with the arrival of Direct Broadcast Satellite (this was the summer of 1993, a few months after the CRTC hearings on the fate of the cable companies in a "200-channel universe"), viewers would have even more choice in their viewing, which she thought was good.

A brief silence followed. Chris appeared flummoxed, looking from speaker to speaker. One of the most vociferous anti-TV participants responded to what this woman said. He, too, had once worked in television, and was convinced that all producers were only after profits, and were thus incapable of considering non-quantifiable concerns like truth, social justice and ethics. Television, he told us, also took advantage of the young and was simply not to be trusted as a reliable or truthful medium. I suggested that there might be more to television than simply manipulation, that it might offer some useful alternatives for communication and the creation of meaning. I also tried to point out that an anti-television stance in this age was, like it or not, somewhat anti-democratic. But the former television producer would have none

of that. The only dangerous thing, he told us, was television itself. The woman who had championed DBS spoke up again, but was drowned out by the rustling of seminar participants getting up to leave. I looked over at Chris to see if he wanted to continue the discussion, but he appeared tired, and dodged my gaze. The body language of the other participants did not indicate any interest in further discussion. I was left facing the woman from Montreal, who was confused by the poor reception her views had received. She wasn't angry, but frustrated by the lack of discussion. I told her I was also, and we parted company.

It is not unusual to encounter people who are willing to defend their strongly held convictions. There was, nonetheless, something very unsettling to me about my experience at the seminar. Who did the man who challenged and silenced the woman from Montreal think he was talking to? It was not as though she was a policy maker, or a powerful television producer (at least, she did not identify herself as such). The criticisms directed at her lacked a sense of proportion, or a sense of response-ability. Of course, one might argue that the man did respond: he stood up for his convictions when prompted to do so. But that does not seem to be the challenge with which response-ability presents us. Part of the problem here has to do with the very notion of "raising a voice". The voice fosters the illusion of a response by its very presence. There is an ideology surrounding and supporting the voice: to raise one's voice is an ethical act, because it does justice to one's agency, fulfilling the modern prescription, "Distinguish yourself!" Indeed, the voice viewed as a metonym for agency takes on the status of a fetish object; there is great stock placed in "raising one's voice." When

I was in high school, I was involved in anti-nuclear activism, which meant that I helped to organize conferences on nuclear arms build-up, and that I helped with research at the Global Community Centre, a local research centre for social justice issues. One of the strategies advocated by anti-nuclear activists was to get towns and cities to declare themselves "nuclear-free zones." I often wondered exactly what this would do; it seemed pretty futile, and I said so to someone at the Global Community Centre one day. She replied that, indeed, declaring a city to be a nuclear-free zone was not likely to stop an ICBM; but also that it was important in any case to raise one's voice.

Raising one's voice, as the encounter at Blue Skies demonstrates, may not in all cases be the just thing to do, even if it "is" just. At Blue Skies, and elsewhere, the voice provides an exclusionary service that is especially troubling when what the voice says is concerned with social justice. Lyotard's specification of different genres of discourse prevents us from taking shelter in the comfort of the correct line, the program that has already been worked out. Quite often, adherence to such programs leads to a politically retrograde haughtiness. As David Trend notes in his article "Rethinking Media Activism: Why the Left is Losing the Culture War,"

The left's program of social equity and respect for difference is at odds with rigid notions of cultural authoritarianism. The left would be expected to favour a more grassroots view. Instead, many activists have subscribed to the same regressive cultural attitudes as the right. In doing so, they have replicated *forms of address* that reinforce social

hierarchies and inequities while draining the cultural realm of possibility.<sup>174</sup>

Right away, we must note Trend's deft grasp of a particularly subtle problem, those "forms of address that reinforce social hierarchies and inequities:" he shifts from content to delivery, immediately bracketing the problem posed by the enunciation itself. Trend also points out that many leftist activists have little patience for questions about, and struggles to control, representation.

It is not unusual to find members of the left establishment criticizing activists concerned with issues of racial or sexual identity by either trivializing their efforts (as irrelevant) or condemning them (as selfish).

This typifies a disturbing historical tendency of radicals *to not listen carefully* to those they believe they represent.<sup>175</sup>

Trend locates this tendency in early twentieth century vanguardism typified by "a Leninist legacy of the professional intellectual revolutionary," and as well by the work of the Frankfurt School thinkers whose analysis claimed, he argues, the necessity of a visionary intelligentsia to provide a compensating 'true consciousness'<sup>176</sup>

Trend's criticism has its precedents. In his essay "Constituents for a Theory of the Media,"<sup>177</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger discusses in psychological detail those

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<sup>174</sup> David Trend, "Rethinking Media Activism: Why the Left is Losing the Culture War," *Socialist Review*, 23:2, 1993: 15, emphasis added.

<sup>175</sup> Trend, p.9, emphasis added.

<sup>176</sup> Trend, p.13.

<sup>177</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Constituents for a Theory of the Media," *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, (New York: Seabury, 1974).



"regressive" attitudes identified by Trend. Enzensberger argues that the Left has taken a defensive posture towards the electronic media, reducing all of the effects those media might have to one: manipulation. For the Left, argues Enzensberger, the media are both entirely venal and entirely effective (as the former television producer at Blue Skies argued). This characterization of the media plays a sort of fetish role: "To cast the enemy in the role of the devil," writes Enzensberger, "is to conceal the weakness and lack of perspective in one's own agitation. If the latter leads to self-isolation instead of mobilizing the masses, then its failure is attributed holus-bolus to the overwhelming power of the media."<sup>178</sup>

Enzensberger thinks that the media are neither entirely manipulative nor entirely benign; they are, rather, antisectarian or "dirty." "In the environment they create," he writes, "[the] desire for a clearly defined 'line' and for the suppression of 'deviations' is anachronistic and now serves only one's own need for security."<sup>179</sup> This need for security is met, Enzensberger argues, by enunciation of a very particular sort. He offers the example of small press publishers whose xeroxed philippics against television and cinema efface a whole other practice:

Presumably, the people who produce them listen to the Rolling Stones, watch occupations and strikes on television, and go to the cinema to see a Western or a Godard; *only in their capacity as producers* do they make an exception, and, in their analyses, the whole media sector is

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<sup>178</sup> Enzensberger, p.100.

<sup>179</sup> Enzensberger, p.102.

reduced to the slogan of "manipulation."<sup>180</sup>

Thus does Enzensberger, like Trend, identify the problem of the enunciating subject; the problem is not what a certain, in this case Leftist, subject says, but the very fact that this subject is speaking. The act of enunciation carries with it a politics, centered around action, assertion and control. This politics was made explicit, in a strange way at the end of the Blue Skies seminar I attended. Chris, the seminar leader, wrapped things up by telling all of us that "the future belongs to those of us with healthy minds and healthy bodies." It is no coincidence that this comment, made at a folk festival, invokes a vaguely fascist cult of excellence. Blue Skies is not the only instance in which leftist analysis or progressive thought resembles too closely a crude avant-gardism eager to reject the first signs of "cultural decay" at hand. This rejection is the negative aspect of that yearning for purity so common in utopian, break-away, or "avant-garde" movements. The Italian Futurist's glorification of war as "the world's ultimate hygiene" is only the most notorious example of an avant-garde's search for an uncontaminated or salvific truth. The collusion of leading Futurists with Italian fascism shows us that there is nothing inherently just about being an outsider, a rebel or an iconoclast. So much, for instance, about the Blue Skies environment - the retreat it offers, its hygienic and halcyon setting, the hostility to mainstream culture it manifests, its refusal of debate and polylogism, and the valorization of community it embodies -

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<sup>180</sup> Enzensberger, p.103, my emphasis.

points not to a program for justice, but a nascent fascism.<sup>174</sup>

Enzensberger, when he wrote the "Constituents" essay, was himself continuing a line of criticism that can be traced back to Walter Benjamin and, more importantly, to Bertolt Brecht. In an essay written by Brecht in the 1930's (but which remained unpublished until 1967<sup>175</sup>), Brecht assailed Georg Luckas's theory of literary realism, criticizing "the element of capitulation, of withdrawal, of utopian idealism which still lurks in Luckas's essay [and] that makes his work unsatisfactory."<sup>176</sup>

Luckas attacked literary formalism, which he believed obscured in literature the real relations among people under capitalism; he turned to the works of Tolstoy and Thomas Mann for examples of what a realist novel should aspire to. Brecht, however, did not accept Luckas's distinction between formalism and realism, and pointed out that "we have innumerable works of an unrealistic kind which did not become so because they were based on an excessive sense of form."<sup>177</sup> Brecht then turns Luckas's criticism of formalism - that it cannot do justice to objective conditions - against realism itself. Brecht points out that we usually use the word form to speak of something phony or hollow: "Let us take the expression: *Formally he is right*. That

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<sup>174</sup> My reading of *Blue Skies* here is informed by Susan Sontag's discussion of fascist aesthetics in her essay on Riefenstahl, "Fascinating Fascism"; Sontag's comment on *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia* - that they are still effective because "their longings are still felt, because their content is a romantic ideal to which many continue to be attached" - is, I think, equally applicable to *Blue Skies*. See Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," in *Under the Sign of Saturn*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), pp.73-105.

<sup>175</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "On the Formalistic Character of the Theory of Realism," trans. Stuart Hood, *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London: Verso, 1980), pp 70-76.

<sup>176</sup> Brecht, p.69.

<sup>177</sup> Brecht, p.72.

means that actually he is not right, but he is right according to the form of things and only according to this form."<sup>178</sup> By championing realism, Brecht argues, Luckas himself succumbs to formalism: he follows the letter, but not the spirit, of realism, reducing it to a crude formula based on an outmoded literary style unequal to the demands of the present class struggle. Brecht then makes an absolutely crucial observation:

A vanguard can lead the way along a retreat or into an abyss. It can march so far ahead that the main army cannot follow it, because it is lost from sight . . . Thus, its unrealistic character can become evident . . . Whole tracts of literature which seem, judging from their form, to be radical, can be shown to be purely reformist, merely formal efforts which supply solutions *on paper*.<sup>179</sup>

Supplying solutions on paper means supplying solutions that are not meant to be responded to. The enunciation on paper is a shelter for the ego that fears an encounter with the other. A solution on paper is already done, it is completed - it cannot respect what is going to happen, the event. In Lyotardian terms, then, Brecht criticizes Luckas for not respecting the *Is it happening?*

What is unrealistic, Brecht argues, is a rejection of engagement. Enzensberger and Trend, in their particular ways, assert the same thing. Thus does the qualifier *on paper* stand as a metaphor for that which is already done. Brecht conjures up the

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<sup>178</sup> Brecht, p.72.

<sup>179</sup> Brecht, p.72.

image of the rational utopian intellectual, drawing up blueprints for the perfectly organized society while outside, violence and starvation continue. By on paper, Brecht means disengaged, which McLuhan meant by on paper as well. The enunciation on paper is what Debord called "the unilateral conclusion which, in the art of the historical society, *always arrived too late*, speaking to others about what was lived without real dialogue, and admitting this deficiency of life."<sup>180</sup>

The discussion of Brecht's essay returns us to the notion of linkage. I said earlier that the poem mimes the humility of the subject. I borrowed the word mime from Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain*. Scarry argues that artifacts, verbal or physical, are "mimetic of sentient awareness." She offers the example of a chair which is, like all written or verbal artifacts, the objectification of our awareness of another person's pain. According to Scarry, when we see another person in pain, there is a process that occurs in our minds that she must explain in two parts but that is really a single process: we see another in pain, and we wish that pain gone. The two are the same, though, because we cannot wish pain gone without perceiving it, and we cannot perceive it without wishing it gone. She then notes:

If this complex . . . event, happening somewhere between the eyes and the brain and engaging the entire psyche, could be made visible, could be lifted out of the body and endowed with an external shape, that shape would be the shape of a chair (or, depending on the circumstance,

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<sup>180</sup> Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 186.

a lightbulb, a coat . . .).<sup>181</sup>

The poem is another objectification of this same event: by the way one of its phrases is linked on to another, it testifies to a fact of human sentience: I trust you, I want to be involved with you, I am open before you, and you may be open also to yourself. The poem mimes the open hand. The linkages in the Milwaukee Sentinel editorials mime something else: a refusal to listen, like that shown by the seminar participants At the Blue Skies seminar. Such linkages are mimetic of both a refusal to listen and a certainty in one's own voice.

If media are built by these linkages, it may be possible to assess them not according to whether they are true or false, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly - not in terms, that is, of what they are - but according to what they do to the subject. The binarism we would be faced with then is trust/anger, which is really a distinction between two different states in the subject. The event - the feeling we have - is the object of study even as it slips away from us. Thus does the importance of honing our sensitivity to the event - of listening - increase.

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<sup>181</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1985), p 209.

## CONCLUSION

### i: Patience

Although it may seem to the reader that the last chapter of this thesis is the most "personal" or autobiographical, the first two ostensibly expository chapters are no more distant from my own experience than the third. The work I have done on Lyotard's two books, *Just Gaming* and *The Differend*, is the record of a very long process during which I read and re-read Lyotard many times. Quite often I thought I had distilled some essence from the writing, only to discover on another reading that I was mistaken or premature. I know now that whatever conclusions I have come to about Lyotard's work must remain tentative; this, of course, is mainly because his work does not arrive at the kind of conclusions most people expect.

This was made especially clear to me one night, about two years ago, while I was still working through *The Differend*. I was sitting at my desk, making notes from different parts of the book, but I was also very distracted: I was thinking about two good friends of mine. One was making a great deal of money teaching English in Japan, and the other had just started a course in book and magazine publishing. I envied both of them, because each seemed to be getting his act together. I, on the other hand, was sitting in front of Lyotard's "pile of phrases" with absolutely no idea of how to proceed. I was almost thirty then, and had been working on this thesis for two years. My job prospects did not seem very good when I finished. I suppose I was feeling some self-pity, but I was also very frustrated at my inability to make sense of and draw conclusions from Lyotard's work. I was eager to be done.

I now know that things would have gone considerably smoother for me if I had taken Lyotard seriously when he wrote, at the start of *The Differend*, that the book would frustrate those who wanted to gain time. I was tempted more than once to dismiss the book as useless, and put it aside, but for some reason, I persisted. I eventually saw that the book was making demands on me that I had not expected. As one of my good friends graduated from his program in publishing - only to be hired two days later - the other sent news that he had secured a new, and even more lucrative teaching job in Japan, and in a more comfortable (he called it "swanky") environment. I still had no idea how this thesis was going to end, and was hard pressed to explain to my family, my friends, and even people I had just met, what I was doing with my life. I was reading, as recently as three months ago, chapters from *The Differend* that I had made notes on in early 1994.

Lyotard would approve of all this re-reading. In his short essay, "Address on the Subject of the Course of Philosophy," he identifies what is most necessary if one is to learn to philosophize: patience. Lyotard does not speak of philosophy, as something the student adds to him- or herself. Rather, he wants his students to philosophize, to have an experience that Lyotard calls autodidactic, an experience in which reading "can only commence" and which is "an exercise in patience." Lyotard continues:

The long course of philosophical reading is not just learning what has to be read, it is learning that reading is never finished, that you can only commence, and that you have not read what you have read. *Reading is*



*an exercise in listening.*<sup>182</sup>

This sort of reading is not likely to be very productive, and Lyotard knows it. He is under no illusions about the marginal status that his philosophical reading holds. It is not quick, efficient, productive, or competent. Indeed, it is precisely the opposite, and Lyotard is blunt about the consequences for the student. Reading philosophically, he says, "means forming yourself in reverse; it is to lose your proper form."<sup>183</sup>

The uncertain status of the reading student's subjectivity in Lyotard's class finds a complement in the uncertain status of the *writing* student's subjectivity in William Stafford's class. Stafford, like Lyotard, writes about the demands of teaching, although Stafford teaches the writing of poetry. In an interview from his book *You Must Revise Your Life*, Stafford comments on the prevalent notion of writing as a process of taking dictation from a "psyche that has already done something. Well," he continues, "I'm interested in the psyche that hasn't done something and then does something."<sup>184</sup> Writing for Stafford, like reading for Lyotard, is an event; the writer cannot know ahead of time what is going to be written. Stafford comments:

I'd like to . . . confront as squarely as possible those who make students feel that writing is something that is done with the fully conscious, already accomplished self. I think writing is itself educational,

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<sup>182</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, "Address on the Subject of the Course of Philosophy," *The Postmodern Explained*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p.101, my emphasis.

<sup>183</sup> Lyotard, p.101.

<sup>184</sup> Stafford, p.73.

exploratory, and worthy of trust while you're doing it.<sup>185</sup>

For both teachers, the selfhood of the student remains uncertain. We saw earlier that Stafford took great risks in maintaining a climate of uncertainty in his classes, refusing to provide not only criticism, but also praise. The comments these teachers make show us that we do not only form ourselves in relation to, or lose ourselves because of, other people, but also in relation to and because of certain media. Not all media are "for us." Some may demand an unravelling of the selves we have become. In our decision to meet this demand or reject it, we go a long way beyond an attempt to understand the content, or even the structure, of a medium. We enter into a very particular type of engagement which I, for one, do not yet fully understand.

## ii: Summary

By what route did we arrive at this point? In the first chapter, I established Lyotard's epistemological position by comparing his view of ethics to the view held by Jürgen Habermas. I went on to detail Lyotard's characterization, in *Just Gaming*, of ethics not as a theory but as a language game in which one might find oneself under an obligation to listen. In this case, speaking loses its patina of autonomy, for the subject who is humbled must listen before he or she speaks.

In the second chapter, we saw how Lyotard develops this humbled subject in the pages of *The Differend*: what are the consequences of humility, and how does it befall us? is the question governing this chapter. For Lyotard, we are humbled by the

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<sup>185</sup> Stafford, p.74.

ethical genre, which humbles the ego in much the same way that the face does in the philosophy of Levinas. Lyotard's specification of this ethical genre was found to be unsatisfactory, however. And so, in the third chapter, I set out to identify and examine an ethical genre of my own choosing: poetry. The tone of this genre establishes its ethical status, and I tried to show that tonality results from what Lyotard calls linkage. As well, I argued that it is tonality that is often responsible for producing differends, and thus that we must learn to locate and analyze tonality, and the linkages that produce it, very precisely.

I finished the last chapter by reminding the reader that this extension of Lyotard's work into media studies does not necessarily make him a media theorist, or even a media philosopher. However, I think that his work greatly enlarges the scope of media studies, and offers a useful starting point for the study of genres, and particularly of tonality, the importance of which grows the more I think about it. Tonality is to the genre, or work or medium, what the feeling is to the subject - a manifestation through time. Tonality, that is, resides in the court of the event. Perhaps media studies is already equipped to deal with tonality, but I doubt it. It seems to me that there is still uncertainty about what a medium does, and even about how to approach the question of what a medium does.

The central claim of this thesis is that Lyotard's writings on ethics, specifically *Just Gaming* and *The Differend*, are deeply concerned with, and offer an ongoing account of, a listening and humbled subject, rather than a subject who finds and deploys a voice. I think this has been sufficiently demonstrated. I have also, though,

tried to show the problems we face when we try to talk about, or imagine, listening. These problems, of course, arise from the interiority that is the core of listening. The humility that listening requires cannot be grafted onto the subject. You cannot go out and read a how-to book about it. It must be learned by each of us. This interior work is not a possible research topic, or a new mode of theorizing: it happens, and that's all.

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