

# THE JOHNS HOPKINS GUIDE TO LITERARY THEORY & CRITICISM

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## LYOTARD, JEAN-FRANÇOIS

One of the most versatile of the so-called poststructuralist French philosophers, Jean-François Lyotard (1924–98) is best remembered as the “philosopher of the postmodern.” Nevertheless, his influence registers in a range of fields, including political theory, ETHICS, AESTHETICS and ART THEORY, Judaic studies, theology, and literary theory.

Lyotard’s reflection on “the figural,” an affective counter-current in discourse, is fundamental to an understanding of avant-gardist experimentation within modern art and the ways in which artistic manifestations more generally inflect thinking through a variety of media. According to Lyotard, the reader’s capacity for deciphering the ethical and political ramifications of individual artworks is sharpened by attentiveness to the figural impulse in the creative endeavor. Lyotard’s inspired interpretation of Kantian idealism contributed to increasing the significance and import of justice, judgment, rules, and rights in a late twentieth-century political and cultural environment of disaster. Just as postcolonial and CULTURAL STUDIES have made an engagement with Lyotard mandatory, so ethical and legal philosophy strives to reckon with the implications of his work (see POSTCOLONIAL CULTURAL STUDIES).

Lyotard emerged as a major voice and force in philosophy with the publication of his doctoral study, *Discours, figure* (1971), when he was well into his forties. Prior to that date, his principal public activity was dissident leftist political activism, although a small volume on PHENOMENOLOGY, *La Phénoménologie* (*Phenomenology*, 1991), appeared in 1954. His friend the historian Pierre Souyri introduced him in the early 1950s to the anti-Stalinist, anti-Communist Party group Socialisme ou Barbarie, led by Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis. For the next decade Lyotard would lead the life of a militant intellectual, writing (under the pseudonym François Laborde) scathing critiques of France’s colonial hold on Algeria for the group’s eponymous journal (see *La Guerre des Algériens*, 1989, *Political Writings*, 1993). Although by the mid-1960s Lyotard would break altogether with collective action, the anti-authoritarian, anti-ideological grounds on which this major shift in his career was based define the mood and thrust of his subsequent written corpus. Even through reflections on art (e.g., *Que peindre?* 1987) or literature (e.g., *Toward the Postmodern*, 1993) the political consequences of Lyotard’s radically independent and deeply ethical thinking unfailingly come to the fore. Whether ostensibly political or not, all of Lyotard’s work “is a struggle,” as one commentator put it, “to listen, to hear a politics that cannot speak the language of the political” (*Readings*, introduction to Lyotard’s *Political Writings* xv).

The pedagogical function, which Lyotard considered fundamental to his life as a philosopher, is an often-neglected biographical element that enlightens many seemingly obscure aspects of his work. Whatever influence the written form of his thought eventually had, all of his texts bear the distinctive trace of having first served in some amphitheater or seminar room—the places where “thinking in the plural,” to paraphrase his close associate Gilles Deleuze, takes place. Lyotard was a strikingly effective and beloved teacher, and his writing is characterized by diverse oratorical styles laced with subtle irony. Immediately upon earning his *agrégation* (the French teaching certificate), he left for Algeria to teach in a *lycée* in Constantine; at his death, he held an active, permanent visiting professorship at Emory University. Between his first and last posts, he taught at institutions as varied as La Flèche Military School, the Sorbonne, and Nanterre (now Université de Paris X) and was a visiting professor in many foreign universities. In the wake of the May 1968 student-worker uprising, which he strongly supported, he was appointed—along with MICHEL FOUCAULT, François Châtelet, Louis Althusser, JACQUES LACAN, and others—to the “experimental” University of Vincennes, where he taught in close association with Gilles Deleuze. He also served as the first president of the Collège International de Philosophie, founded in 1983. (See GILLES DELEUZE AND FÉLIX GUATTARI.)

As the year 1970 begins to fade into the past, Lyotard parts company with any hint of orthodox adherence to KARL MARX AND FRIEDRICH ENGELS and SIGMUND FREUD. Yet the drift of his remaining work will be as much a renewed alliance with the unadulterated core of these thinkers’ work as a stand against the uses and abuses to which he saw their work subjected. This is how Lyotard strove to describe thought and critique in what would soon be called “the postmodern.” As Lyotard’s struggle against capital mutates and broadens into a broader struggle against system, so the Freudian notions of *Affekt* and *Nachträglichkeit* (belatedness) remain steadfastly crucial to his reflection on aesthetic and ethical judgment.

An initially obscure “report on knowledge” to the provincial government of Quebec was to thrust Lyotard into the center of debates about POSTMODERNISM in the 1980s. The broad celebrity of *La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (1979, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1984) could not, however, prevent its claims and especially its implications from being widely misunderstood. Although the postmodern subject places “grand narratives” promising universal emancipation under suspicion, or as Lyotard would put it, approaches them with “incredulity,” Christianity and Marxism are far from doomed to immediate and wholesale collapse. Instead, under postmodern conditions, the manners in which groups choose to live their lives tend

to resist unification under any one dominant discursive model. "Little narratives" of tiny groups and individuals who manage to cohabit the planet despite their differences, in other words, subsume the "grand narratives," with their sometimes inhuman consequences. And though characteristic of culture in the second half of the twentieth century, "postmodern," in Lyotard's use of the term, is not so much a chronological descriptor of, say, literary production as it is category for discussing "minoritary" or experimental thinking concurrent with modernism or even creativity of pre-Enlightenment times. "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern," writes Lyotard. "Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (79). If one considers the entire range of his interventions on the subject, Lyotard's ambivalence about the very term "postmodern" appears to have produced inconsistent understanding as to what the term means and how it manifests itself. In any case, the report's publication not only brought Lyotard worldwide attention but also led to a contentious debate engaged primarily by Jürgen Habermas, who defended the viability of consensual politics under what he termed the "unfinished project" of modernity. FREDRIC JAMESON also weighed in to differ with Lyotard on the desirability of a postmodern response to liberalism rather than a Marxist one.

Yet to think of Lyotard primarily as a "postmodernist" not only misleadingly emphasizes shifts and breaks in his career rather than continuities; it misrepresents his relation to the very notion. Lyotard was highly ambivalent about the appropriateness of the term "postmodern" for describing a state of affairs in which incredulity toward narratives of emancipation is the prevailing attitude. "Postmodernist" implies, further, an adherence to or an advocacy of the corresponding position—the ism. This is tantamount to forgetting that Lyotard's resistance to all group-driven rallying calls, no matter what the source or purpose, was visceral. Were Lyotard the "postmodernist" that defenders and detractors alike are wont to characterize him as, it would be difficult to defend the striking consistency of his thought. In short, one should not confuse the heterogeneity of his interests and the application of myriad discursive styles—hallmarks of Lyotard's *oeuvre*—with some inclination to reduce philosophical positions to relativist mush. Patent proof of this is easily obtained from the extreme but convincing experiment of juxtaposing the tone and message of one of Lyotard's very first articles, "Nes en 1925" (1948, "Born in 1925," *Political Writings*, 1993), in which the influence of THEODOR W. ADORNO is already decipherable, with those of *Le Différend* (1983, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, 1988).

Lyotard's reading of EDMUND BURKE (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beauti-*

*ful*) and IMMANUEL KANT ("Analytic of the Sublime," in *Critique of Judgement*) on the sublime and his extension and repositioning of the sublime as a key notion in the postmodern constitutes yet another major tenet of his work that has repercussions for literary studies today. The breadth and depth of Lyotard's investigation of this repositioning have lent him a central place in the history of philosophical approaches to the sublime beginning with LONGINUS. His *Leçons sur l'analytique du sublime* (1991, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, 1994), represents only one of his several published interventions on the sublime's aesthetic dimensions and ethical consequences. Like the figural in relation to discourse, "delight" (Burke) or the "negative pleasure" (Kant) that makes up the feeling of the sublime and its inflection of rational thought proved fruitful in allowing Lyotard to bring his commitment to, and his abiding reflection on, affect, anamnesis, and infancy (*infans*) to bear on judgment in relation to the presence and absence of criteria.

Although it has yet to have the impact of *The Postmodern Condition*, *The Differend* is, from a philosophical perspective, Lyotard's most important work. Not only did he personally consider this to be the case but the concepts developed throughout his work—however diverse the object or style of discreet works—lead to *The Differend* or emanate from it. Structured as a series of numbered sections arranged in chapters and interrupted by "notices" named for thinkers essential to Lyotard's periodic digressions, *The Differend* is on the surface a massive and meticulous refutation of revisionist challenges to the extent of the Shoah, or Holocaust. At a more fundamental level, Lyotard argues that in order to be believable a witness need not have actually *seen* that to which he or she may eventually bear witness. Judgment according to rules may well listen to such testimony, but it will not *hear* it because an intractable differend renders such understanding impossible. Although *The Differend* functions as a complex interweaving of threads spanning the history of philosophy from Protagoras to EMMANUEL LEVINAS, perhaps the most important strands are LUDWIG WITGENSTEIN's theory of language games (an endless linking and disjunction among phrase regimens that function like moves in a game of chess), ARISTOTLE's reflections on "now" (from which Lyotard develops his notion of "event"), and Lyotard's own prior research on the sublime. All of these elements are combined and conjugated in order to "save the honor of thinking," whose most noble purpose is to judge. Lyotard's wager is that freeing criteria for judgment from predefined rules may enable the "critical guardian" (*le veilleur critique*) to attend to the admissibility of such witnesses beyond reality as it is defined by law.

Lyotard's exploration of Judaism has inspired the claim that he went further than any other non-Jewish twentieth-century thinker in that engagement. The range of texts and the insistence of Lyotard's attentiveness to Judaism and Jewishness in all of their aspects are indeed formidable. From shorter pieces, such as "Oedipe juif" (1970, "Jewish Oedipus," *Toward the Postmodern*), a study of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, or "Retour sur le retour" (1988, "Return upon the Return," *Toward the Postmodern*), where a reading of Joyce's *Ulysses* allows him to explore filiation and "the feminine" in Judaic tradition; to sustained passages of *The Differend* where Lyotard's "infinite conversation" with Levinas helps him advance the notion of judgment without criteria; to his contribution to the discussion of Heidegger's Nazism in *Heidegger et "les juifs"* (1988, *Heidegger and "the Jews,"* 1990); to *Un Trait d'union* (1993, *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity*, 1999), a commentary on Paul of Tarsus's caesarean birth of Christianity from Judaism, Lyotard's meditation on Judaism is unflagging.

In tandem with and cross-pollinating his philosophical work, Lyotard's interest in painting is significant. Including a vast array of books or major essays on Marcel Duchamp, Albert Ayme, Pierre Skira, Stig Brøgger, Jacques Monory, Valerio Adami, Shusaku Arakawa, Daniel Buren, Ruth Francken, Sam Francis, Barnett Newman, Gianfranco Baruchello, Henri Maccheroni, Gilles Lapouge, and Karel Appel, Lyotard's corpus tirelessly tests its philosophical claims against the work of art. By "work of art" Lyotard means both the object itself, the product of the artist's handiwork, and the work that art performs collaboratively with the spectator. The model for this latter function, which accounts for what is sometimes seen as the eternal aspect of literature or painting, is the Freudian dreamwork, which works without thinking.

Lyotard's interest in and engagement with literature is equally wide ranging, abiding, and important for literary studies in the twenty-first century. *Le Mur du Pacifique* (1975, *The Pacific Wall*, 1990) and *Récits tremblants* (1977), though to date virtually unnoticed, stand as literary works per se within the Lyotardian corpus. Lyotard's analyses of Duchamp and Newman deal, arguably, as much with these painters' writing as they do their contributions to visual art. What literary figures have demonstrated stylistically or have asserted directly about the power of a phrase—whether it be Gertrude Stein (*The Differend*) or Pierre Klossowski (*Économie libidinale*, 1974, *Libidinal Economy*, 1992)—is frequently the crucible from which Lyotard deploys his highly original thought. Without examples borrowed from the poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé (see STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ AND FRENCH SYMBOLISM) and Michel Butor, Lyotard's first major treatise, *Discours, figure*, would not have been able to

display what the figural working within discourse looks like on the page. The problematic that Lyotard explores in his final works, on André Malraux and ST. AUGUSTINE, could be characterized as philosophy's adoption of literary style in order to speak or write itself.

Numerous steadfast readers of Lyotard were dismayed by the publications that resulted from his late interest in André Malraux, the committed novelist whose subsequent espousal of Gaullism was never forgiven by the Left. Yet the works that most abidingly intrigue Lyotard are Malraux's writings on art: a few compact, obscure essays written early and several massive studies published between the end of World War II and the end of his life. Lyotard shared with Malraux an almost mystical belief, not in art's redemptive power, but in its capacity to protect a space—against all extrinsic forces—in which innovative politics and ethics can still be thought and invented. In extremely different voices, employing disparate discursive genres, *Signé Malraux* (1996, *Signed, Malraux*, 1999) and *Chambre soured: L'Antiéthétique de Malraux* (1998, *Soundproof Room*, 2001) both significantly extend Lyotard's meditation on what remains intractable in the human, on what is inhuman in the face of inhumanity. A similar intractability is legible in *La Confession d'Augustin* (1998, *The Confession of Augustine*, 2000), Lyotard's last work, left unfinished but published posthumously.

#### Robert Harvey

See also FRENCH THEORY AND CRITICISM: 6. 1968 AND AFTER and POSTMODERNISM.

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