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The Wild and the Sublime: Lyotard's Post-Modern Politics

MICHAEL DROLET*
Royal Holloway and Bedford New College, University of London

This paper examines the thought of Jean-François Lyotard in relation to the problems of justice and the constitution of a post-modern politics. It argues that Lyotard is highly influenced by Kant's aesthetics and specifically by the idea of indeterminate judgement in the formulation of a conception of justice that, in an age of social variegation and fragmentation, underlies a politics which strives to promote different ways of looking at, and living in, the world. The text concludes that Lyotard's conception of justice and its resultant politics are founded upon a skewed reading of Kant's work such that claims of truth and morality are separated from those of judgement. The result is a politics marked by radical individualism which poses the threat of social atomization.

> Time never stands still, nor does it idly pass without effect upon our feelings or fail to work wonders on the mind.
>
> Saint Augustine, *Confessions*

With the millennium drawing to a close we are witness to a world marked by rampant consumerism, stunning advances in information and communication technologies that have turned the vast planetary expanse into a 'global village', and by a plethora of other phenomena that strain the cognitive faculties. It is an age of stupefaction; a wonderment that has prompted intellectuals to strive to grasp what is underfoot and offer a vision as to how we might live in a time characterized by discontinuity and fragmentation. In short, it is a period that is seen by some as post-modern.

This article will examine the work of a leading exponent of post-modernism and the post-modern: Jean-François Lyotard. Whilst I wish to avoid reducing post-modernist thought to that of Lyotard, his work is amongst the most innovative and challenging in the post-modern genre. Lyotard marks himself off from many of his contemporaries who share his *Weltanschauung* but only pay lip service to the prescriptive dimension of human life. In one way he does this by going beyond the fatalistic and obfuscatory musings of someone like

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Jean Baudrillard.[1] In another way he transcends the limited scope of deconstructivism. Here the work of Jacques Derrida is of particular significance. Whilst Derrida's deconstructivism is marked by the impulse of an enlightenment critique in adopting a fundamental attitude of 'recognition and respect' – an attitude marked by the near Ciceronian maxims of good faith, fidelity, and attentiveness to detail[2] – its focus is tightly delineated. This is because it offers nothing but a perpetual re-assessment of the enlightenment critique from which it derives its initial inspiration. Lyotard responds to the familiar charge that post-modernist thought is politically irresponsible. It is a charge that is often made not only because of post-modernism's apparent self-indulgence, but also because it has confined itself to deconstruction without presenting any vision that might offer a *corpus praescriptum* for human life. It is the manner in which Lyotard responds to the charge of irresponsibility that is of particular importance to us here.

Lyotard's Post-Modern Politics

One criticism of post-modern thought is that its deconstructivist penchant has rendered it either politically naïve or politically irrelevant. This charge is most frequently raised by modernist and traditionalist thinkers.[3] Lyotard is one of the first post-modern thinkers to treat the accusation seriously, and provide a robust response.

With his contributions to the group *Socialisme ou barbarie*,[4] his involvement with the struggle for the liberation of Algeria and his active participation in the events of *mai '68*, Lyotard demonstrated an unflinching adherence to the spirit of justice. Whilst his work has undergone a series of radical transformations,[5] the spirit of justice remains the standard to which the whole of his work has been dedicated.

In remaining loyal to that spirit, Lyotard argues that justice must be indeterminate.[6] In *Just Gaming* he contends 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, and therefore prescriptions, just so, without criteria'.[7] In adopting that position, Lyotard repudiates the descriptive, as opposed to

[1] See for instance, J. Baudrillard, *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu Lieu* (Paris, Galilée, 1991) or *L'Illusion de la Fin: ou la Grève des Événements* (Paris, Galilée, 1992).

[2] C. Norris, *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1992), pp. 17, 46.

[3] For a modernist stance see J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (translated by F. Lawrence), (Cambridge/Oxford, Polity, 1992), p. 183. For a traditionalist response see A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, Basic, 1987). Bloom's remarks of Nietzsche and Heidegger are particularly relevant, especially p. 226.

[4] Lyotard's rejection of the Marxist foundations of the group *Socialisme ou barbarie* led to a profound personal loss and first hand experience of intellectual ostracism with that group's denunciation of his work.

[5] G. Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 2.

[6] '[J]ustice remains always in the future, yet to be determined.' In B. Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London, Routledge, 1991), p. 125.

[7] J.-F. Lyotard and J.-L. Thébaud, *Just Gaming* (translated by W. Godzich), (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985), pp. 25–6.

prescriptive,[8] idea that justice and truth are in some way inextricably bound. In the first instance, the epistemological difficulties in realizing truth are legion. They are difficulties that have confronted western philosophical thought from the pre-Socratics to present day thinkers. Secondly, Lyotard contends that any conception of truth can be only arbitrarily 'grounded'. That which is assigned the label of truth becomes, in a circular manner, true; it is true because it is truth. Truth is self-justificatory. The repercussions upon social life are profound. Those practices that do not readily fit the criteria of truth are at best marginalized and at worst expunged from social reality. According to Lyotard, social life as we have experienced it within the modern and pre-modern ages is based upon the communicative premise that we share a common language grounded upon truth.[9]

In seeking to shatter the communicative premise of the pre-modern world – or *ancien régime* – and establish the basis for a new order of communicative interaction, modernism as an intellectual movement sought to discover hidden truths behind the surface of human reality. The endeavour to delve beyond the immediacy of that reality was a quest to liberate the human spirit from stifling socio-political prejudices. Whilst such an enterprise was worthy of praise, Lyotard's critique of modernity is that through a rejection of the tradition-bound order that was the *ancien régime*, the discourse of modernity was presented as being *inextricably* linked to human liberation and as such was tied to the notions of truth and justice. Therefore, the discourse of modernity has the quality of a self-justificatory meta-narrative which unleashes a brutal terror in the name of liberty and human emancipation. Lyotard's critique has much force, and is total in its condemnation of the meta-narrative of the modern age. In fact, Lyotard raises a cry to 'wage war' against the discourse of the modern.[10] Yet, in waging such a war, Lyotard's post-modern stance does not imply a comprehensive negation of modernity. Rather, it is marked by what appears to be ambivalence.

Modernity or the Terroristic Totality

Lyotard argues that neither modernity nor post-modernity can be considered strictly delimited historical entities in which one (the post-modern) follows the other (the modern).[11] In effect, the post-modern is latent within the modern; 'modernity is pregnant with its post-modernity'.[12] The difficulty that confronts any reader of Lyotard is how one distinguishes between the modern and the post-modern. In attempting to answer that question Lyotard, in a superficially ironic tone,[13] relies on the thought of Kant, a thinker whose division of the scientific, moral, and artistic into separate spheres was seen by Hegel as the

[8] 'Political prescriptions as to the "just" are incommensurable with descriptions of the "true" because the former refer to an *indeterminate* idea, the latter to a determinate object of cognition.' Readings, *Introducing Lyotard*, p. 108.

[9] J.-F. Lyotard, *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur le Savoir* (Paris, Minuit, 1979), p. 7.

[10] J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 82.

[11] J.-F. Lyotard, 'Réécrire la modernité', in *L'Inhumain: Causeries sur le Temps* (Paris, Galilée, 1988), pp. 33-44.

[12] Lyotard, 'Réécrire la modernité' p. 34.

[13] Irony has a privileged status within Lyotard's thought, for in shattering conventions it helps us to see hitherto unwitnessed dimensions of what is viewed as the banal.

philosophical characterisation of the modern age.[14] In distinguishing between the modern and the post-modern, Lyotard draws specifically on Kant's account of aesthetic experience as elaborated in the *Critique of Judgement*.

For Lyotard, the post-modern is bound up within the modern, just as the totality of aesthetic experience in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* is expressed by the ideas of the 'beautiful' and the 'sublime'. Kant was to show the experience of the beautiful as one in which our faculties of imagination (as the capacity of forming images) and understanding (as the capacity to unite these images into a whole) are, in our contemplation of *natural* beauty, placed in a state of harmony. The harmony between these two faculties invokes a state of pleasure within the observer. The experience of the sublime, however, is one that elicits both pain and pleasure because of the dis-harmony between those two faculties. We suffer pain because, in experiencing the sublime, a chasm is created between our faculties of imagination and understanding. We experience pleasure because our imagination, by constantly forming and re-forming ideas, seeks to create a state in which these ideas can be united. In so doing, our imagination corresponds to the rational laws that constitute our faculty of understanding and exposes negatively, by its incapacity to form these images, the power of our faculty of understanding.[15]

It is on the basis of Kant's theory of aesthetic experience that Lyotard exposes the distinction between the modern and the post-modern:

> Here, then, lies the difference: modern aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure. Yet these sentiments do not constitute the real sublime sentiment, which is an intrinsic combination of pleasure and pain: the pleasure that reason should exceed all presentation, the pain that the imagination or sensibility should not be equal to the concept.
>
> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to permit a stronger sense of the unpresentable.[16]

For Lyotard, modernity glosses over the unpresentable by displaying it as the missing contents of the form. In so doing, the unpresentable is moulded in such a manner that the form is not altered by its content. In this way, the form remains recognizable and can continue to offer 'solace and pleasure' to the observer. Modernity, in proffering this 'harmony' between form and content, violates the true nature of aesthetic experience. The dual sentiment of pleasure and pain characteristic of the aesthetic experience of the sublime is distorted; that which our understanding cannot grasp in our imagination's presentation is either skipped over, moulded, or suppressed by those categories that govern our

[14] J. Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne: Zwolf Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1989), p. 30.

[15] I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement* (New York, Hafner, 1951), pp. 96–7.

[16] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 81.

understanding.[17] In fact, the sublime is rendered one-sided such that our experience of sublimity is rendered akin to that of beauty. For Lyotard the sublime in the modern age offers the 'happy' sentiment of the harmony between our faculties of imagination and understanding and the *oeuvre* of our reflection. In violating the true nature of that experience, modernity can maintain the illusion of its vitality.

Lyotard's conception of the post-modern, however, does not seek to provide a false solace. It denies complacent comfort and strives to unmask the unpresentable and hence restore the true nature of the sublime. Thus, in unveiling what our understanding cannot grasp of our imagination, the post-modern cannot be governed by pre-established rules that correspond to some conception of truth. Nor can it be judged by familiar categories implicit within such a conception of truth, since they inhibit the revealing of the unpresentable. In attempting to disclose the unpresentable, Lyotard seeks to unhinge the basis for judgement within the meta-narrative of modernity. At an epigrammatic level he does this by asserting that the '*Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo)'.[18]

According to Lyotard, it is this 'paradox' of the 'future anterior' that reveals the resistance of the post-modern to being placed within any meta-narrative. Thus, that which is post-modern has the character of an '*event*'. Post-modernism treats the event as something which is complete in itself. Whilst the post-modern is that which cannot be subsumed under any *a priori* or totalizing logic, modernity violates the momentary and independent character of the event by seeking to place it within a comprehensive logic that embodies the claim to justice and truth. For Lyotard, it is this 'unifying' of diverse events under a meta-narrative that represents the terror of modernity. That which cannot be made to fit is 'silenced.'[19] It is this 'terror' that has shattered the validity of modernity.

In rejecting the Kantian claim that the ethical (founded upon practical reason) is in some way dependent upon the epistemological (founded upon pure reason) Lyotard argues in a manner akin to Nietzsche that such claims to justice and truth, which are characteristic of any meta-narrative, are a form 'of the will to power'. Thus, the meta-narrative of modernity should be considered as dishonest. For Lyotard such a consideration poses the pressing political task of liberating individuals from the false claims of meta-narratives. However, to counter the meta-narrative of modernity with another, which in combating the ideological would necessarily make claims to justice and truth, is to fall prey to the will to power. How, then, can the meta-narrative of modernity be countered?

Lyotard, in striving to climb out of a Foucauldian universe whose every dimension is invaded by power, reminds us of the events that are 'the shadow of negation hollowing out reality to the point of making it dissipate'.[20] By evoking the events of *mai '68*, Auschwitz, or *The Gulag Archipelago*, Lyotard reveals

[17] For an account of how these categories govern our understanding see, Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, pp. 7–34.

[18] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 81.

[19] Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 63–4.

[20] J.-F. Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (translated by G. Van Den Abbeele), (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 57.

those 'thousands of uncomfortable little stories'[21] that he believes erode meta-narratives. In so doing he evokes the idea of the 'differend'.

> As distinguished from a litigation, a differend [*différend*] would be a case of conflict between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side's legitimacy does not imply the other's lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgement to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits this rule).[22]

The politics of 'little narratives' appeals to our feelings of culpability. This is because through the idea of the differend we realize that a wrong has been committed against the articulation of narratives that cannot be subsumed under a rule of judgment imposed by a meta-narrative. Lyotard implicitly contends that in realizing that a wrong has been committed we are prompted by a spirit of justice. Yet he argues that we cannot right this wrong by having recourse to another form of determinate judgment. What is needed is a form of judgement that conforms to the idea of justice, one which never can be literally represented. Yet how can judgements conform to a norm that is indeterminate? In relying on Kant's Third Critique, Lyotard answers this question by introducing the idea of 'indeterminate' or 'reflective judgement'.

Reflective judgement can best be described in opposition to determinate judgement. The latter is a form of judgement in which one applies a pre-existing concept to determine the nature of an object. Indeterminate or reflective judgement is a form of judgement in which one cannot apply a pre-existing concept. It is a form of judgement that stems from aesthetic experience and is marked by the faculty of imagination straining to create understanding. For example, the occurrence of an event, or the telling of a 'little narrative' – which should be seen as sublime – disrupts any pre-existing frame of reference such that we are unable to know how to understand it. Reflective judgement is required so that the imagination can experiment and invent different ways of understanding the event[23] despite, or precisely because of, the impossibility of a definitive understanding.

Lyotard's reliance upon the idea of reflective judgement may appear to be a disguised form of radical pluralism or relativism. It is not. He contends that both radical pluralism and radical relativism entail an *a priori* or transcendent stance toward judgement in which every object of judgement is treated with an equal respect. Such a stance erases differences between things by treating them as all the same. For Lyotard, reflective judgement implies 'a respect for differences *among* things, not relativism's respect *for* things'.[24]

Once the connexion between judgement and justice has been established, the link with the political becomes transparent. For Lyotard, politics is prescriptive in that it is directed toward just action. As justice is indeterminate, any political act is reliant upon reflective judgement, and such a judgement never leads to

[21] J.-F. Lyotard, 'Lessons in paganism', in A. Benjamin (ed.), *The Lyotard Reader* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989), taken from C. Bürger, 'Modernity as postmodernity: Lyotard', in S. Lash and J. Friedman (eds), *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992), p. 78.

[22] Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. xi.

[23] Reading, *Introducing Lyotard*, p. 106.

[24] Reading, *Introducing Lyotard*, p. 125.

that which is definitive. In this respect politics as 'the threat of the differend'[25] represents a demand for change:

> There is no politics if there is not . . . a question of existing institutions, a project to improve them, to make them more just. This means that all politics implies the prescription of doing something else than what is. But the prescription of doing something else than what is, is prescription itself: it is the essence of a prescription to be a statement such that it induces in its recipient an activity that will transform reality, that is, the situational context, the context of the speech act.[26]

Politics, as a demand for change, does not imply *any* kind of change – as a radical pluralist politics would. The kind of change invoked implies the continued straining of imagination to arrive at understanding – despite the impossibility of any total, definitive, understanding.

In this respect, the 'politics of little narratives' indicates such a demand for change. It is a means of putting 'forward the unpresentable in presentation itself'.[27] In a wider sense the politics of 'little narratives' represents a politics of the sublime. In a manner akin to the experience of the sublime, these 'little narratives' awaken the experimental travail of our imagination. They prompt that faculty to invent different and new ways of understanding. The break with definitive cognitive categories becomes complete. With the labour of imagination we are awakened to the insight 'that history consists of a swarm of narratives . . . ; the people does not exist as a subject, it is a mass of thousands of little stories that are at once futile and serious . . . This succession of serial stories is admirably commonplace, and it implies no recurrence and no return'.[28]

Liberation from recurrence and return is, as Nietzsche suggested, the overcoming of memory, a memory that conforms to 'the rules of knowledge'. In this manner, politics is viewed by Lyotard as evoking *Durcharbeitung in contrario* to *Errinerung*. For Lyotard, *Errinerung* implies the desire to appropriate the past, to grasp that which has past, or 'discover' and master that which is at the source of our thought.[29] *Durcharbeitung*, however, he defines as 'a labour linked to thinking that which, of the event and the meaning of the event, is constitutively hidden from us, not only by past prejudice, but also by the dimensions of the future that are the *pro-ject*, the *pro-gramme*, the prospective, . . . '.'[30] For Lyotard, politics should be seen in the light of his definition of *Durcharbeitung*. It is an activity that frees events, and the manner in which they are conceived, from *all* 'prejudice' or forms of transcendental logic. Politics thereby exposes the *living* specificity of events, the revelation of their unpresentable aura. It offers the release of the free flow of the sublime.[31]

The Impasse of Lyotard's Discursive Politics

Lyotard's conception of politics as the demand for change is highly seductive because it is founded upon reflective judgement in which the play of imagination

[25] Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. 138.
[26] Lyotard and Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p. 23. Taken from Reading, *Introducing Lyotard*, p. 108.
[27] Cf. note 16.
[28] Cf. note 19.
[29] Lyotard, 'Réécrire la modernité', p. 38.
[30] Lyotard, 'Réécrire la modernité', p. 35 (My translation).
[31] Lyotard, 'Réécrire la modernité', p. 40–1.

strives to arrive at a concept for understanding. Indeed, Lyotard's linking of politics, justice, and reflective judgement is an impressive meshing. This mesh, whilst beautiful in the Kantian sense is, however, hermetic. It is partly achieved by a partiality for that which satisfies an appetite marked by finicky taste. Thus the textual sources of Lyotard's inspiration are subject to a skewed interpretation in order to realize his objective. It is with a certain irony that upon this very point Lyotard attacks hermeneutic theory.[32]

Lyotard versus Kant

Lyotard's fickle taste is most clearly displayed in his reading of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. According to Lyotard, Kant's Third Critique breaks with the rule-bound nature of the first two Critiques. Indeed he proclaims that Kant 'cures himself of the disease of knowledge and rules in passing to the paganism of art and nature'.[33] This is a singular reading of Kant. Lyotard either ignores or dismisses outright what Kant expressed most clearly – that the *Critique of Judgement* must be seen in the light of *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *The Critique of Practical Reason*.[34] By identifying a strange epistemological rupture between the young and the old Kant (readers of Althusser beware!) Lyotard also rejects the fact that, for Kant, practical reason (the basis of ethical judgement) pure reason (the basis of cognitive judgement) and reflective judgement, are inextricably tied. The significance of the connexion between these three critiques has profound moral implications that cannot be dismissed.

Kant argues that moral agents should base their decisions on the best possible knowledge of reality. This is exemplified by the citation of Horace's *Epodes*, more particularly those famous words: '*Sapere Aude!*'[35] Kant's perception of reflective judgement plays an important role in attaining that knowledge.[36] Lyotard, however, drives a wedge between reflective judgement and our faculties of cognition and desire. This is because the *Critique of Pure Reason* is concerned with the *a priori* principles that ground all our empirical knowledge, whilst the *Critique of Practical Reason*, gives an account of the *a priori* principles that would ground our moral conduct, and this implies that both critiques are inextricably connected to the rational (we need only glance at their titles!). Thus for Lyotard, Kant's first two Critiques are tied to 'the horror of the modern age': *a priori* principles that fashion *all* knowledge – including indeterminate knowledge – within a totalizing logic. If, however, one accepts that Lyotard can successfully dismiss the relevance of the relation between the first two Critiques and the Third Critique, a number of other profound difficulties emerge.

According to Kant, the *Critique of Judgement* attempts to show that there is a fundamental regulative principle that underlies the procedure of judgement. This principle is the purposiveness of nature. The dismissal of such a principle poses serious difficulties for Lyotard which he conveniently avoids by casting Kant's work in a new mould. In shunting aside Kant's explicit proposition that the experience of the sublime is the result of our contact with natural objects

[32] Reading, *Introducing Lyotard*, p. 133.

[33] J.-F. Lyotard, *Instructions païennes* (Paris, Galilée, 1977), p. 36.

[34] Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 13.

[35] '*Sapere Aude!* "Have courage to use your own understanding!" – that is the motto of enlightenment.' In I. Kant, 'An answer to the question: what is enlightenment?', in *Perpetual Peace and other Essays* (translated by T. Humphrey), (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1983), p. 33.

[36] I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 199.

because they mark the 'point at which our faculty of imagination breaks down',[37] he 'successfully' eliminates the problem posed by the idea – hypothetical though it is – that the purposiveness of nature is the fundamental regulative principle that underlies the procedure of judgement. In dismissing the relevance of the purposiveness of nature, and the importance of natural objects, Lyotard portrays the experience of the sublime in the light of artistic endeavour. Thus the sublime is seen in connexion with 'little narratives' which are effectively viewed as art works. In moving natural objects aside, Lyotard does not share Kant's pre-occupation with 'magnitude' and 'fearfulness' as concomitant to natural objects operating within the hidden purposiveness of nature. In their stead, Lyotard focuses his attention solely upon that aspect of the Third Critique in which the imagination is seen in the light of the power of experimental judgement without *a priori* criteria. Kant's conception of aesthetic experience is now further transformed. Not only are natural objects relegated from Lyotard's presentation, but the sublime itself is separated from the beautiful. This is because the beautiful is characterized by harmony between the faculties of understanding and imagination, a harmony of form and content. In the seductive light of the formlessness of the sublime, the harmony between form and content characteristic of the beautiful is implicitly viewed with suspicion by Lyotard.[38] Ironically, Lyotard fails to treat the work of Kant, the philosophic inaugurator of the modern age, in a serious manner. As such, Lyotard's thought is guilty of that 'silencing' 'prejudice' that he attributes to modernity.[39]

Lyotard's selective reading of Kant may strike the reader as showing a certain philosophic arrogance. However, his perception of the sublime in the light of artistic endeavour is of interest. Whilst Kant's account of aesthetic experience was seen in connexion with the faculties of knowledge and desire, his stated objective was to arrive at a completed system 'under the name of metaphysic'.[40] Lyotard, motivated by the spirit of justice, is, however, interested in demolishing such systems. And it is on this point that Lyotard's perception of the sublime as artistic experience is interesting.

If the sublime is that which is unpresentable, then the task of the artist is to evoke that which escapes presentation. It is upon this very point that Lyotard, in following Heidegger,[41] returns to the classical view whereby art was understood as *sophia*,[42] i.e. knowledge/wisdom, not philosophic knowledge. This is because art was perceived as being in direct contact with nature. Such a conception of art was defined in terms of imitation, as *mimesis*, of nature. For the ancients, nature embodied all that was complete. Human life, as part of nature, conformed to her laws. Art, as *mimesis*, embodied nature's totality and exposed, in the immediate – without the mediation of forms – her laws to men. It is with the emergence of philosophy that a tension arises between nature and art. Lyotard, like Heidegger, seeks to return to that pre-philosophic moment where

[37] Bürger, 'Modernity as postmodernity', p. 89.

[38] J.-F. Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event*, (New York, Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 31.

[39] J.-F. Lyotard, *L'Inhumain*, pp. 63–64.

[40] Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 4.

[41] W. van Reijen and D. Veerman, 'An interview with Jean-François Lyotard', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 5 (1988), 287–8.

[42] Cf. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* I, IV. 2–3, (London, Heinemann, 1968), pp. 54–5. See Leo Strauss' remarks on this text, in L. Strauss and H.-G. Gadamer, 'Correspondence Concerning *Warheit und Methode*', *The Independent Journal of Philosophy*, 2 (1978), pp. 6–7.

art is *sophia*. This he does by evoking the idea of 'presence', which refers to the aesthetic time or moment in which there is a non-mediated relationship between the viewer and the object of aesthetic experience:

> It seems to me that precisely what is important in aesthetic time is what is called 'presence'. Not in the sense of the present, nor in the sense of what is there, but in that sense in which, on the contrary, the activity of the very minimal synthesis of the given into the very forms which are free (forms properly speaking, not merely schemas) is suspended. It would be a question of a kind of, let us say, spasm or stasis . . . which has a relation, I think, with a 'direct' access not to the meaning of the situation (which is the case of the forms), but to the material. . . . it would perhaps be a matter of a non-mediated relationship with the material, without even the most elementary synthetic activity.[43]

The idea of art as *sophia* is given a practical dimension and further reinforcement by Lyotard's characterization of the philosopher as an artist. It is a characterization that is revealed in his evocation of the distinction between the philosopher and the intellectual:

> One's responsibility before thought consists, on the contrary, in detecting differends and in finding the (impossible) idiom for phrasing them. This is what a philosopher does. An intellectual is someone who helps forget differends, by advocating a given genre, whichever one it may be (including the ecstasy of sacrifice), for the sake of political hegemony.[44]

In distinguishing between the philosopher and the intellectual, not only does Lyotard shatter the tension between art and philosophy but, in so doing, he links art with justice. The nexus is founded upon reflective judgement, a form of judgement that is realized by the artist/philosopher. In this manner, Lyotard's conception of the artist/philosopher is very much akin to Aristotle's conception of the man of prudence (the *phronimos*). For Lyotard, the unfolding of the unpresentable, which is the task of the artist/philosopher, is that which maintains the vitality of the differend. Justice is thereby assured. The *phronimos*, too, strives to realize justice. Since he is endowed with critical intelligence, he is able to judge that which is best for him (private prudence) and that which is best for men in general (political prudence). Yet his critical intelligence, which is at the basis of his prudence (private or political), is indeterminate. The prudent man does not rely upon *a priori* criteria for his judgements. He is distinct from, say, the philosopher of Plato's *The Republic*. This is because the philosopher is reliant upon the knowledge of the forms in making any judgement. Instead, for the prudent man it is his critical intelligence that founds his judgements. And 'if the intelligence . . . is not the reflection of the intelligible, this does not signify that there is no longer a norm, but that it is its own norm'.[45] Lyotard affirms his allegiance to this idea:

> . . . the thinker I am closest to in this regard is Aristotle, insofar as he

[43] Van Reijen and Veerman, 'An interview with Jean-François Lyotard', pp. 288–9.

[44] Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. 142.

[45] 'Si l'intelligence . . . n'est plus le reflet de l'intelligible, cela ne signifie pas qu'il n'y a plus de norme, mais qu'elle est à elle-même sa propre norme'. In P. Aubenque, *La Prudence chez Aristotle*, (Paris, P.U.F., 1986), p. 51.

> recognizes . . . 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, and therefore prescriptions, just so, without criteria. This is, after all, what Aristotle calls prudence. It consists in dispensing justice without models.[46]

Whilst the critical intelligence of the prudent man is its own norm and one directed toward justice, justice *per se* is viewed by Aristotle in the light of a higher end: the Good Life.[47] It is an end that is consistent with 'the good or the best of all things',[48] and it belongs to the science of Politics. The *phronimos*, exercising his prudence in being just, strives to realize the Good Life for all. Thus, he comes to be the best statesman. Lyotard appears to be strongly influenced by such a view. The parallel between his conception of the philosopher and Aristotle's conception of the *phronimos* is, at a glance, striking. Both base their judgements on that which is indeterminate. Both seek justice, and in so doing their actions are political. Indeed, Lyotard makes this clear by arguing that politics attests to the differend.[49] Yet the parallel breaks down when we scrutinize more closely the kind of task set out by Lyotard for the philosopher.

In being just, the philosopher must labour at unfolding the unpresentable. In exercising political prudence, the prudent man realizes a kind of justice even though conceptual or categorical modalities cannot be determined. Whilst Lyotard wishes to draw a parallel between his conception of the philosopher and Aristotle's conception of the man of prudence on the basis of the indeterminacy of judgement, such a parallel is without real foundation. For Aristotle the justice that is realized by the prudent man is viewed in the light of a specific end that conforms to a natural teleology (for all things are set out by nature): that of the Good Life. For Lyotard even though the philosopher realizes justice by labouring at the unravelling of the unpresentable, his is a justice that cannot be witnessed through the optic of a specific end. Lyotard can dictate no such teleology. To do so would 'impose' a logic – like the hidden regulative principle of nature in Kant's aesthetics – to which everything must conform (even if the modalities are indeterminate, as with the prudent man's critical intelligence). Whilst Lyotard claims that the end he strives for is a 'philosophical politics apart from the politics of "intellectuals" and "politicians",'[50] such an end is an embodiment of the wholly indeterminate. It evokes the unpresentable for the sake of the unpresentable. Since the end is unpresentable, its indeterminacy implies that *no end* can be fixed.

Such a vision departs radically from an ancient perspective that sees human life as striving to conform to a natural teleology. Indeed, this is the task of the *phronimos*. His critical intelligence allows him to judge what is best for 'human things' so that they may conform with the superior natural and divine realms.[51] Lyotard, even though he is inspired by pre-Socratic and Aristotelian perspectives, is thus in a reflective bind. The understanding of art as *sophia* in which an

[46] Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, pp. 25–6, in Reading, *Introducing Lyotard*, p. 125.
[47] Aristotle, *The Politics* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1979), Bk. III, ch. 9., p. 119.
[48] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976), Bk. I 2–1.
[49] Lyotard, *The Differend*, pp. xii–xiii.
[50] Lyotard, *The Differend*, p. xiii.
[51] For a more detailed discussion of this point, specifically in its relation to political philosophy see, L. Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? and other Studies* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 92.

unmeditated rapport with the 'material' is attained, and the Aristotelian perception that the *phronimos* can realize justice on the basis of indeterminate judgements, are both immensely appealing to Lyotard. Yet these ideas can only be conceived within a natural world that sees human existence as marked by teleology, a teleology that necessarily rests upon a claim to the truth of the natural world. Lyotard, however, makes no such claims; he strives to destroy them. His starting point is far removed from an ancient position, appearing to share the eighteenth and nineteenth century views of aesthetic experience as the creation of authenticity.[52] Yet here too any inspirational rapport breaks down. This is because authenticity is perceived in terms of some claim to truth – the authentic life expressing something true about the human condition. Instead Lyotard – left with a series of inspiring visions – can only evoke the unpresentable for the sake of the unpresentable, thereby contending that the meta-narrative of modernity may be undermined and authentic expressions realized. Ultimately, the unpresentable end becomes a means to something else: another indeterminate end. Thus, we plummet *ad infinitum*; and, as Aristotle contends, desire is left void and objectless.[53] Although Lyotard may realize the quietus of the will to power, for desire is sapped from will, his thought collapses into an infinite regression.

The Post-Modern 'Condition'

Lyotard endeavours to fashion his critical thought so as to avoid the pitfalls of radical relativism or pluralism. However, he also attacks these forms of thought precisely because they adopt an *a priori* stance that erases differences between things. As I have already noted, Lyotard's thought is grounded in 'a respect for differences *among* things, not relativism's respect *for* things'.[54] Whilst his thought does not adhere to relativism's respect for all things, it does embody a profound respect for one thing: the differend. It is this respect for the differend that not only implies indeterminacy as an end in itself, but provides within discourse – recall the idea of 'little narratives' – the indeterminate linking of phrases.

The indeterminate linking of phrases is premised upon the sublime experience of the constant straining of the faculty of imagination to arrive at a concept for the faculty of understanding. The sublime experience leads to a continual experimentation in the linking of phrases. It offers endless possibilities in looking at and living in the world. Whilst such a vision is appealing, it poses some serious difficulties. For Lyotard, part of the indeterminate linking of phrases is evoked through the idea of silence. This is because silence is in itself a form of pronouncement, one that in respecting the differend reveals the unpresentable. Indeed, silence indicates the kind of stupefaction that is characteristic of dual sublime sentiments of pleasure and pain. The experience of the sublime provokes pain because the faculty of imagination is incapable of arriving at a conceptual representation that conforms to understanding. It affords pleasure because in working to arrive at a conceptual representation, imagination con-

[52] A neat discussion of this point can be found in C. Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Concord, Anansi, 1991), pp. 62–9.

[53] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. I. 2.

[54] Reading, *Introducing Lyotard*, p. 125.

forms to the rational laws that constitute our faculty of understanding. It is an experience that lies beyond words.

In his enthusiasm to save the name of the differend, Lyotard is confronted with a profound difficulty. Viewing silence as a pronouncement of the sublime sentiments of pleasure and pain saves the name of the differend. However, any modern idea of a discursive universe – in which individuals are viewed as engaging in the construction of a just régime – is thereby shattered. Whilst this conforms to Lyotard's political intent (because the construction of such a régime is founded upon an *a priori* truth pronouncement) it implies a retreat into solipsism.

In respecting the differend as an end in itself, only the pronouncement of silence can embody fully the multiple linking of events.[55] Whilst the continuous articulation of pronouncements, with no one pronouncement articulating a claim over another,[56] may be a possibility open to the artist/philosopher, it is hard to accept as a universal principle. If the name of the differend is to be saved, then only the pronouncement of silence, as a general principle, can realize that task. With such a pronouncement, however, we are relegated to a universe of atomization, and ultimately to solipsism, because there is only an indeterminate basis upon which to construct a shared discourse. Our sensibilities toward justice create within us an auto-critique: one that constrains us from making statements for fear that they will violate the differend.

With no apparent basis for a shared discourse, Lyotard's post-modern politics fails to respond adequately to the critique launched against deconstructivism and post-modernism; a critique that contends that deconstructivism and post-modernism can offer no *corpus praescriptum* for human life. Lyotard's post-modern politics nevertheless has a worthy critical intent. Not only is it dedicated to the spirit of justice, but it promises to undermine the menacing 'one-dimensional homogeneity' that long ago was revealed as ever-present within contemporary society.[57] Lyotard's post-modern politics prompt us to think critically about what leads us to desire certainty and stability in an age of rapid change – a desire that unwittingly reinforces 'one-dimensional homogeneity'. In so doing, it offers us the possibility of looking at and living in the world in new and different ways. Whilst these aspects of Lyotard's thought are clearly appealing, the virtues of his post-modern politics are undermined by its profoundly anarcho-Nietzschean bias.

Not only does the differend and its universal pronouncement in silence imply an atomized world,[58] but the anarcho-Nietzschean bias of Lyotard's post-

[55] Or phrases, because, according to Lyotard, the phrase is 'simply the empty singularity of an event, the fact of an "it happens" '. In Reading, *Introducing Lyotard*, p. 114.

[56] Here Lyotard's difficulties are fully exposed in his confronting Faurisson's 'revisionist' (outrageous) thesis that we cannot not know for certain whether gas-chambers actually existed because there 'survived no witnesses to corroborate the fact as a matter of first-hand experiential proof'. In Norris, *Uncritical Theory*, p. 71.

[57] The work of the Frankfurt school is that which leaps to mind at once. See for example, H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston, Beacon, 1964), T. Adorno, M.Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York, Herder and Herder, 1972). This unease with uniformity, however, is powerfully expressed in the nineteenth century. See A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York, Doubleday, 1969), A. S. Kahan, *Aristocratic Liberalism: the Social and Political thought of Jocob Burkhardt, John Stuart Mill, and Alexis de Tocqueville* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992).

[58] Lyotard argues that social atomization is not a relevant problem in contemporary society. See J.-F. Lyotard, *Lectures d'Enfance* (Paris, Galilée, 1991), p. 76.

modern politics implies a rejection of any conventional conception of power. As power is seen as either prompting political and social change or maintaining a political and social status quo, it is tied in its conventional sense to a conception of truth: that of creating or maintaining the just political and social order. Lyotard's rejection of a conception of truth, and the anarcho-Nietzschean basis of his post-modern politics, allows power to float freely. Because power is left waiting to be grasped, reality moves perilously close to something like a Hobbesian state of nature. The relation between solitude and fear that Hobbes exposes is particularly threatening when we consider Lyotard.[59] This is because fear not only prompts the individual to give up rights to the sovereign, but assures obedience to the sovereign. Fear is not seen in the multitude; it appears when the individual is isolated.[60] Since justice demands respect for the differend in Lyotard's post-modern politics, it is silence that fully embodies the multiple linking of phrases. Such silence, however, implies the collapse of a discursive community. With the collapse of such a community, we are faced with an atomized universe in which the individual is isolated.

The point is crucial, as Hannah Arendt has noted. In following Hobbes, Arendt makes clear in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*[61] that the combination of isolation and fear is the basis for a totalitarian universe. By destroying the conditions for a discursive community, totalitarianism relegates individuals to their isolated spheres, thus calling their identities into question – for that which makes us human comes about in our relations to others. Isolation and the gradual erosion of identity cultivate fear. This fear is used by totalitarian régimes to obtain and maintain power. Not only is power used to destroy opponents; it is used to furnish a collective, mass, 'one-dimensional identity'.[62] In order to allay the fear that comes with loss of identity and isolation, individuals come to identify with the Party or the Nation. In that totalitarian identification there is a further loss of sense of self. The effacement of humanity is the inevitable result.

Conclusion

Lyotard's post-modernism is aimed against totalitarianism, and it prompts sober reflection about the basis of modernity and the modern world. But it is an endeavour that fails. In its rejection of the idea of linking justice with truth – even if that remains but a guiding principle[63] – and in its anarcho-Nietzschean rejection of power, it can offer nothing apart from deconstructive chatter in the face of ever more disturbing right-wing movements.[64] As humanity has borne witness time and again, such movements have no qualms about seizing political power by disguising their intentions within an obscurantist language marked by a skewed and barbarized vision of the aesthetic.

[59] L. Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: its Basis and its Genesis* (translated by E. M. Sinclair), (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 111.

[60] T. Hobbes, *English Works*, vol. VIII, p. xxiv, in Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, p. 112.

[61] H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Cleveland, World Publishing, 1962).

[62] This problem is examined in a somewhat less sinister context by A. Giddens in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, Polity, 1991).

[63] On this point see C. Lefort, *Écrire a l'Épreuve du Politique* (Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1992), especially pp., 37–54.

[64] This point is well put, even if polemically, by Christopher Norris in his, *Uncritical Theory*, pp. 84–5.

To abandon ethical claims by reducing everything to the 'level of so many rhetorics, narrative strategies, or Foucauldian "discourses" '[65] can only leave one dis-empowered in the face of political dangers that cannot be ignored.

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[65] Norris, *Uncritical Theory*, p. 85.