

THE PHILOSOPHER-ARTIST

A NOTE ON LYOTARD'S READING OF KANT

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One of the intriguing features of Lyotard's philosophy lies in the fact that it is articulated against a backdrop of contemporary political catastrophes which he seeks to trace to their origins and to situate in a broader perspective. From among these, three - Auschwitz, Hungary 1956 and Paris 1968 - are singled out for what they reveal about the illusory nature of the age of modernity and the political ideals it spawned. All three represent instances of disillusionment in which a specific ideal of modernity was refuted by reality - the ideal of human rights by the reality of the Nazi genocide, the ideal of a people's self-determination by the Soviet repression in Hungary, and the dream of democracy of the student movement by the French riot police. Lyotard has lost faith in all "grand narratives", stories that are so all-encompassing as to leave no room for narratives in which the claims of marginal, underprivileged, or simply different groups find expression. It is for the rights of these local narratives that he pleads; only if they flourish, will we be safe from universalism and totalitarianism. What we have here is a first approximation of what it means to advocate a postmodern position on politics.

Lyotard's thought is also very contemporary in another respect : its philosophical approach. In fact, Lyotard comes from the phenomenological school, but he has taken the

"linguistic turn".¹ From Wittgenstein he learned that language can no longer be presented as a unified whole. Rather it is composed of a multitude of different language games which cannot be reduced to one common denominator. We can easily see that what is at stake in the political realm has its counterpart in the philosophy of language. Just as the rights of every single narrative must be defended, so the integrity of each language game must be preserved. For Lyotard, these two realms (language and politics) are ultimately concerned with one and the same issue. The acknowledgment of the diversity of the language games is the alternative to the monistic soliloquy of modernity, and to its totalitarian consequences in the field of our socio-political life. In this sense, Wittgenstein is a postmodern philosopher. But he is not the only one. In what he calls "my book of philosophy", The Differend, to our surprise Lyotard claims that Kant is another proponent of postmodernism to whom he owes much. The book itself contains no less than four extensive "Notices" on Kant. On what grounds can Kant's work be regarded as a "prologue to an honorable postmodernity"?² After all, Kant is usually considered to be an advocate of modernity. We have to ask in what ways Lyotard wants to mine critical philosophy : for its content, or for its method ? As we will see, Lyotard, by means of a brilliant and daring reinterpretation moves toward a reassessment of both architectonic and method.

Lyotard praises Kant's philosophy, not for its intended systematic unity, but for its respect for heterogeneity. Kant,

in his three Critiques, actually delineates three distinct spheres. He "recognizes"³ the specificity of each claim raised in these spheres, and tries to pay due respect to them. Following Deleuze, Lyotard sees the central problem of the Kantian critique as a "conflict of the faculties" of knowledge. To each of these faculties corresponds a specific jurisdiction so that in each of the three Critiques, one of these faculties takes the lead and provides the principles : understanding in the first Critique, reason in the second and judgment in the third. Lyotard no longer speaks of these as psychological faculties, which necessarily intersect in a no less problematic "subject". To him it is necessary that the Kantian philosophy undergo a Wittgensteinian revision. What used to be "representations" and their respective faculties now become "families of phrases", the word "family" here alluding explicitly to Wittgenstein.⁴ The content of critical philosophy is thus reinterpreted in terms of a philosophy of language. As a result the domains of the three Critiques can now be defined as the realms of the "cognitive phrase", the "ethical phrase" and the "aesthetic phrase", respectively. Accordingly, the conflict between the faculties becomes a differend which takes place between two families of phrases. Indeed, Lyotard goes so far with his linguistic reconstruction of the Kantian argument as to interpret the raw sensory state experienced through sensitivity as a "phrase". The contact between brute sensation and the pure forms of sensibility, as they are presented in the Transcendental

Aesthetic, is then seen as a "dialectical" relation between two phrases; it is conceived of as a differend.⁵ Well aware of the violence that he does to the letter of Kantianism, Lyotard concedes the merely analogical character of his linguistic restatement by saying that a sensory state is "structured like" a phrase and that it would be better to call it a "quasi-phrase". Apart from this concession, Lyotard is completely earnest about his intention to reexamine all problems of the philosophical tradition in the light of his philosophy of language.

Lyotard is only one philosopher who has made the linguistic turn and who has corrected the Kantian philosophy in accordance with it. Habermas is another. One of the curious things in the debate between Habermas and Lyotard is that the same material is appropriated from Kant for two diametrically opposed agendas. On the one hand, Habermas claims that Kant is the initiator of the philosophical discourse of modernity because he has articulated the theoretical differentiation of reason in the three independent spheres which have gradually emerged in modernity: science, morality and art.⁶ It is precisely the philosophical separation of those "value spheres" (Max Weber) that makes Kant so modern. For Lyotard, on the other hand, it is exactly Kant's acknowledgment of this differentiation of culture that makes him, not modern, but postmodern. If we want to know what is really in question in this debate, if we want to move beyond superficial considerations, we must ask what each of these philosophers wants to do with the differentiation expressed in the three Critiques.

In a word, Habermas suffuses this differentiation with a global concept of communicative reason, whereas Lyotard celebrates the irreversible dispersal of the families of phrases, rejecting any concept of reason. He likes to designate this "breaking up" with the Kantian word Zerstreuung, which he translates as diaspora.

The four "Notices" devoted to Kant in The Differend correspond to the four parts of what Lyotard considers to be the Kantian philosophy: the three Critiques and a fourth, added by Lyotard, the so-called "Critique of Political Reason".⁷ He discusses each of these spheres at length and we must admit that his witty reconstruction of Kantianism pays close attention to the whole of its content. But Lyotard is not just interested in the Kantian themes as such. In addition to those precious resources, he retains from Kant his philosophical method, his manner or, as he would say, his "mode" of discourse. In his more recent writings, in which Kant occupies a large place (e.g. L'enthousiasme), Lyotard describes the task of philosophy as "critique" and calls himself a "critical watcher", "critical judge", or "critical philosopher". This does not mean that he adheres blindly to critical philosophy in its historical shape. After Wittgenstein, this is no longer possible. It is imperative that we take a closer look at Lyotard's concept of critique and how it differs from Kant's.

Lyotard states his conception of "critique" in the following thesis : "the critic...[has] to judge without having a rule of judgment".⁸ Firstly, this thesis means that critique is

concerned primarily with judgment, that it inherently involves the faculty of judgment. And in this, he is certainly right. Secondly, this thesis draws attention to the fact that the faculty of judgment cannot rely on any specific rule to perform its task. This is reminiscent of the famous passage in the Critique of Pure Reason, quoted by Lyotard,⁹ in which Kant says that in its formal-logical use the faculty of judgment cannot be guided by any rule, because otherwise a second faculty of judgment would be needed to apply this rule, and so on ad infinitum. Lyotard certainly has this argument in mind but it alone cannot explain the specific function of philosophical critique.

A hint is given to us by a second statement taken from the same passage in L'enthousiasme. "In Kant, the critique must not lead to a doctrine". If once again we try to read this assertion in light of the first Critique, it is unlikely that we will understand the meaning of the negative imperative "must not". As a matter of fact Kant, in this first Critique, draws a distinction between "doctrine" and "critique". The latter is defined as a preliminary task, as a propaedeutic, which consists in establishing a scaffolding of the whole system, whereas doctrine, for instance transcendental philosophy, refers to the finished system. Kant's distinction is based on the degree to which the analysis of a priori concepts achieves a state of completion.¹⁰ Yet the difference between critique and doctrine does not entail a radical opposition. The Critique of Pure

Reason itself already contains a "Doctrine". And surprisingly this doctrine concerns precisely the faculty of judgment and its procedure involving the pure concepts of understanding. It should be recalled that the section of the Critique of Pure Reason in which the schematism is discussed is entitled "The Transcendental Doctrine [Doktrin] of the Faculty of Judgment"! In this case, it is hard to understand how the Critique could judge without any rule for the understanding and its schematism do provide the faculty of judgment with rules and guidelines. Faced with this, what could Lyotard possibly mean by a philosophical critique that judges without any determinate rule, by a critique that does not lead to any doctrine?

The attentive reader of Kant's Critique of Judgment will recall that it does not lead to a doctrine.¹¹ It deals with reflective, as opposed to determinate, judgments. A reflective judgment is one which is rendered without the intervention of a definite concept, whereas a determinate judgment always involves such a concept, one that serves as a rule for the operation called subsumption. On the one hand both the Critique of Pure Reason, by virtue of its principles of the understanding, and the Critique of Practical Reason, by virtue of its moral law, circumscribe a specific sphere of objects, namely nature and freedom. These two Critiques, because they are based on determinate judgments, lead to a doctrine. On the other hand, the Critique of Judgment, especially in its analysis of aesthetic judgment (the latter being purely reflective), remains at the

level of critique : when subjected to an aesthetic judgment, the beautiful object is not determined in itself as an object. The predicate of beauty simply refers to a quality that the object has for the perceiving subject. The reflective judgment of beauty is the result of a free play between the imagination and the faculty of concepts in general, which means that no specific concept is involved, nor a doctrine.

Can we say that Lyotard's characterisation of philosophy as merely critical as opposed to doctrinal is an allusion to the aesthetic judgment ? If so, he is positing an uncomfortably close link between philosophical critique and aesthetic critique, virtually equating the two. It would imply that Kant's philosophical discourse as a whole functions as a reflective judgment. In actual fact, however, this is true much less for the concrete result of each Critique than for their way of proceeding, for their transcendental methodology. Kant has not been very explicit about the critical nature of his own philosophical discourse, but Lyotard's suggestion has some plausibility insofar as Kant, in the first Critique, puts forth a "transcendental reflection"¹² which he considers a preliminary requirement for anyone who wishes to state something a priori about objects.

It is impossible here to determine what the implications of this methodological operation were for Kant himself. It suffices it to stress that Lyotard defines his own use of the word "critique" with the help of the adjective "reflective"¹³ and that,

at first sight, the concept of reflection could represent a common ground for these two conceptions of philosophy as a "critical" activity. As soon as we take into account the respective aims of aesthetic and philosophical judgments, however, serious reservations surface about Lyotard's interpretation of Kant's critical method. An aesthetic reflective judgment has no specific conceptual rule because, by definition, it neither leads to, nor searches for, any definite concept. On the other hand, philosophical reflection aims at the discovery of the a priori concepts and principles of knowledge and action. Hence, the spectator of a beautiful object judges without a rule, whereas philosophy judges with a view to a principle that it discovers (in the sense of un-cover) through reflection.¹⁴ Lyotard universalizes the model of aesthetic reflection because he wants to free philosophical discourse from all universal principles, from all repressive laws. Therefore he clearly opts for Kant's third Critique,¹⁵ which he then uses as a general paradigm for philosophy. This looks very much like an illicit aestheticisation of philosophy.¹⁶

This interpretation finds its confirmation in Lyotard's Leçons sur l'Analytique du sublime (1991). There he examines the status of Kant's philosophical discourse using reflective judgment as a guiding thread. But although for Kant reflection can be teleological as well as aesthetic, Lyotard only appropriates the latter, because the word "aesthetic" refers directly to a feeling of pleasure or pain. He claims that this

feeling becomes the criterion for pure reflective judgment, that is, according to his extrapolation, the ultimate yardstick of Kant's critical discourse as a whole. "By what means, as the saying goes, can he [the critical thinker] set the conditions of legitimacy in judgment when he is not supposed to have any means at his disposal before making his critique. In a word, how can he make valid judgments «before» he knows what it means to make valid judgments, and how can he do so in order to discover how to make valid judgments? The answer is that critical thought has at its disposal, in reflection, that is to say in the state in which an unassigned synthesis places it, a sort of transcendental pre-logic. This pre-logic is in reality an aesthetics, since it consists in nothing over and above the sensation that affects all actual thought in the mere act of being thought: the sensation of thought feeling itself thinking and feeling itself as thought, at the same time"¹⁷ For Lyotard, the recourse to this feeling of pleasure or pain as a criterion has the advantage of making aesthetic judgment "immediate"¹⁸ This means that the whole of Kant's philosophy has its root in sensibility and that selfcritical reason has to search for its "orientation" in the realm of feeling.

Further proof of the existence of an aesthetic paradigm in Lyotard can be found in the relationship he postulates between philosophical discourse and the rules that it (as a meta-language) tries to establish for every family of sentences (as object-language).¹⁹ In this role, philosophy does not confine

itself to the discovery of the rules; it becomes, as it were, creative. In fact, this creative aspect is the other side of the more passive attitude that characterizes aesthetic judgment. The latter constitutes an aesthetics of reception, whereas the former corresponds, in Lyotard's aesthetic paradigm, to the aesthetics of production. This is the reason why he sometimes calls the work of the philosopher an "invention" rather than a discovery, and then refers to the philosopher himself as an "artist" : "the inventor of rules is only the artist of criticism".²⁰ For Lyotard, the philosopher does more than find or discover a rule that is more or less at hand ; like an artist he has to invent or create it. This is reminiscent of the Kantian conception of the genius, who is a person who gives art its rule. Lyotard has no problem associating the work of the philosopher with that of the artist. In the following passage, he gathers under the common heading "reflective judgment" activities that do not concern a doctrine. These activities are the thematic object of the third and the fourth Critique, as well as the philosophical discourse as such: "Our faculty of reflective judgment is not based on a category or on an already given universal principle waiting to be applied. Rather, it has to judge, when faced with a singular instance or with an unforeseen possibility, without a rule precisely in order to establish a rule. The activity of the artist, of the critical philosopher and of the "republican" statesman proceeds from this use of reflective judgment ; the same is true of any innovative [inventive] approach which, in the

tracks of the unknown and the illicit, breaks with the given norms, shatters the received consensus and revives the sense of the differend."²¹ What separates this position from Nietzsche's conception of the artist-philosopher is one small step. Lyotard knows he has left critical philosophy in its classical form behind. He is well aware of the passage of the Critique of Judgment in which Kant denies that either a philosopher dedicated to the most delicate inquiries in reason, or a physicist, like Newton, can legitimately lay claim to the title of genius²². According to Kant, this title is reserved exclusively for the artist of the fine arts.

In conclusion, I want to come back to the political aspect of Lyotard's thought and see what consequences the adoption of the aesthetic paradigm as a critical method of philosophy has for it. As I remarked before, the philosopher must pay scrupulous attention to the specificity of different families of phrases and to the conflicts that sometimes occur between two such families. These conflicts are of a special type; they are what Lyotard calls differends. The only way to become aware of such differends is through a feeling, the feeling of the sublime. Here, Kant's aesthetic judgment makes another appearance in the context of an explanation of the act of philosophizing, this time not just as an analogy. The clashes between ideas and reality that were mentioned earlier under the headings Auschwitz, Budapest 1956 and Paris 1968 are all cases of the sublime for Lyotard. They all involve a pure idea that cannot be adequately

presented in the sensible world. The philosopher must show some sort of aesthetic sensitivity if he wants to fulfill his task as a critical observer of the political scene. However, unlike the case of the beautiful, the feelings of pleasure and pain which are intertwined in the sublime do not have to be shared by everyone²³. Thus the philosophical discourse based on them may give rise to a proliferation of small narratives. Fragmentation and particularism become the lot of philosophy.

Adorno is certainly a thinker who played an important role in the recognition of the relevance of avant-garde art as a phenomenon with a specific truth claim. He has helped to make Lyotard aware of the challenge which modern art represents, particularly to philosophy. Today art and philosophy are the essential participants of a dialogue about the possibility of their own existence, a dialogue in which both should be equal partners. Lyotard, for his part, seems to take this relationship so seriously that he tends, on the grounds of a systematically exploited analogy, almost to reduce both partners of the dialogue to one and the same. At one point in fact, he describes the Critique of Judgment as a "work of art",²⁴ on the grounds that every theoretical enterprise is a narrative that "dissimulates" itself. I rather doubt that Lyotard's tendency to abolish the distance between art and philosophy maximizes the dialogue's potential.

Notes

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, Le différend (Paris: Minuit, 1983) 11-12; trans. G. Van Den Abbeele, The Differend. Phrases in Dispute (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) XIII.

² Lyotard, Le différend 11; trans. XIII.

³ Lyotard, Le différend 190; trans. 130. Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, L'enthousiasme. La critique kantienne de l'histoire (Paris: Galilée, 1986) 32. Pérégrinations (Paris: Galilée, 1990) 31; trans. David Carroll, Peregrinations. Law, Form, Event (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 11.

⁴ Lyotard, L'enthousiasme 11, 30, 112. In his writings of the early eighties, Lyotard speaks of "regimens of phrases".

⁵ Lyotard, Le différend 96-98; trans. 62-63.

⁶ Jürgen Habermas, Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985) 29-30; trans. F. Lawrence, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987) 18-19. Cf. Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity", Habermas and Modernity, ed. R. J. Bernstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985) 161-175.

⁷ Lyotard, Le différend 189; trans. 130. Cf. Lyotard, L'enthousiasme 31.

⁸ Lyotard, L'enthousiasme 11.

⁹ Lyotard, L'enthousiasme 19. The expression "gift of nature" is found in Immanuel Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft,

A 133 (Citations from Kant's works have been taken from the standard edition of his Werke: Kants gesammelte Schriften [hrsg. Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften], cited hereafter as Ak. with volume and page numbers : Ak. 3: 32).

¹⁰ Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft B 27 (Ak. 3: 44-45).

¹¹ Kant, Kritik der Urteilskraft, Einleitung, Teil VIII (Ak. 5: 194).

¹² Kant, Kritik der reinen Vernunft A 262-263 (Ak. 3: 216).

¹³ Lyotard, L'enthousiasme 12. Cf. Lyotard, Le différend 12; trans. XIV.

¹⁴ In this sense, every determinate judgment (transcendental as well as empirical) contains a reflective moment. See Kant, "Erste Einleitung", Kritik der Urteilskraft, Teil V (Ak. 20: 212).

¹⁵ Lyotard, Le différend 11; trans. 13. Jean-François Lyotard, Instructions païennes (Paris: Galilée, 1977) 36.

¹⁶ At one point, Lyotard seems to acknowledge the violence that he is doing to the letter of the Kantian philosophy, that is when he admits the necessity of a "Critique of critical reason". Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, "Judicieux dans le différend", La faculté de juger, ed. J.-F. Lyotard (Paris: Minuit, 1985) 200; trans. Cecile Lindsay, "Judiciousness in Dispute, or Kant after Marx", The Lyotard Reader, ed. A. Benjamin (Oxford & Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989) 328.

¹⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, Leçons sur l'Analytique du sublime (Paris: Galilée, 1991) 48 (my emphasis), cf. 19-20, 47.

¹⁸ Lyotard, Leçons sur l'Analytique du sublime 23, 61.

¹⁹ Lyotard assigns philosophy two tasks : to find its own rules, and the rules of every other family of sentences. Cf. Lyotard, L'enthousiasme 18 note. Lyotard, Le différend 12; trans. 14. Jean-François Lyotard, Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants (Paris: Galilée, 1988) 31. But for the reasons that I just mentioned, philosophy is not likely to formulate its own rules at will. Lyotard, Le différend 95; trans. 60-61 : "Philosophical discourse has as its rule to discover its rule: its a priori is what it has at stake. It is a matter of formulating this rule, which can only be done at the end, if there is an end. Time can therefore not be excluded from this discourse without it ceasing to be philosophical".

²⁰ Lyotard, "Judicieux dans le différend" 208; trans. 334 Cf. also Lyotard, Le différend 30; trans. 13. Lyotard, L'enthousiasme 109. Lyotard uses the expression "to invent rules" to characterize the creation of genius in the field of aesthetics, cf. Jean-François Lyotard, Le tombeau de l'intellectuel et autres papiers (Paris: Galilée, 1984) 79.

²¹ J.-F. Lyotard and J. Rogozinski, "La police de la pensée", L'Autre Journal 10 (1985): 27 (quoted in Herta Nagl-Docekal, "Das heimliche Subjekt Lyotards", ed. M. Frank et al., Die Frage nach dem Subjekt [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988] 242). Jean-François Lyotard, L'inhumain. Causeries sur le temps (Paris: Galilée, 1988) 148. Lyotard sometimes tries to attenuate the creative aspect contained in the verb "invent" by saying that he is using

it in its "old meaning". Indeed the Latin word invenire means "to find"!

²² Lyotard, L'enthousiasme 94.

²³ Lyotard, Leçons sur l'Analytique du sublime 286.

²⁴ Lyotard, Instructions païennes 36, 28.