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Abstract

I met the philosopher a few years ago when he was director of the College of Philosophy. (A significant detail that underlines his commitment to knowledge, education and the proposition that 'childhood is the season of the mind's possibilities.) To arrange our meeting- I wanted to discuss a matter of translation - I telephoned him.

Free at Last

Julian Pefanis

I met the philosopher a few years ago when he was director of the College of Philosophy. (A significant detail that underlines his commitment to knowledge, education and the proposition that 'childhood is the season of the mind's possibilities.') To arrange our meeting – I wanted to discuss a matter of translation – I telephoned him.

'When would it be convenient for us to meet, Professor Lyotard?' I inquired.

'Well, when would you like to meet me?' he replied. Of course any time was OK for me. After all, I was a research student living in Paris, and on a daily basis the most exciting thing in my life happened in the library at the *Maison des sciences de l'homme*. That is, not much. Certainly nothing I wouldn't drop for the chance of meeting a living *philosophe*.

'Any time that suits you, Professor' I repeated. I mean surely, Jean-François, you are a busy man much in demand.

'But what suits you' he countered. By this I was completely foxed. Who was I to demand his time? But rather than end this banal predicament with an appropriate statement like '9:30 on Tuesday,' I somehow managed to make things worse:

'Professor Lyotard, any time suits me. After all, I am freer than you are.'

Ouch. After a momentary delay which allows me to reflect on my communication skills – in the silence of a hissing white noise – he replies:

‘Are you sure?’

Am I sure I am freer than Jean-François Lyotard? The bottom falls out of my stomach as the realisation sinks in: here I am telling a French philosopher – someone who has fought for, militated for, studied and breathed freedom – that, in some way, he is not free!

I finally deal with my embarrassment and we duly meet and discuss his ... *Economie Libidinale* which I was studying with an eye to translating. ‘How could you translate that? It’s all polemics.’

Well, yes it is polemical, but it also marks a profound point of rupture between politics in the modernist and postmodernist eras. In this book it wasn’t a matter of the collapse of the metanarratives of legitimation, that is, a collapse of belief in the goals of the Enlightenment. That sounds a bit like an epistemological or religious issue. No, here it was a matter of a failure of ethics in the machineries of Marxism and Freudianism. It’s also true that he doesn’t put much in the place of the discredited theory. This has to wait until his Kantian turn. It’s more of a confessional: throughout all the excoriation of the machines he acknowledges his own libidinal investments. He was not a philosopher shy of using the word love.

Strange intensities: those English peasants weren't forced off the land into the factories; they voted with their feet to escape the centuries of idiocy of rural existence. They embraced the chance to work like mules in the mines, to drink themselves into a stupour in pubs. They welcomed the opportunity to get fucked by capital, to be in the hell of production. Furthermore they weren't waiting around to be liberated by someone less content with the world than they were, to be told that they colluded with Capital to make their own lives a misery. They didn't want to be saved from their strange affection for the prostitution of capitalism.

It was a simple message to revolutionary politics: beware of those who will capitalise desire on behalf of the oppressed; treat people as ends in themselves and not as a means to an end. And it has more than a passing reference to a categorical imperative, which is of course precisely where Lyotard was heading, having discovered a radically ethical moment in Kant. With Kant it was necessary to rescue him from the neo-Kantians and to celebrate that moment of indeterminacy when the whole edifice imploded: the sublime. Here was something that linked the moment of revolutionary politics – the suspension of authority, the making of rules in the absence of rules – with the moment of modernist aesthetics.

So I read the formulations in the *Postmodern Condition* and 'Answer to the question: what is the Postmodern?' with respect and interest. You will recall that to be postmodern, and thus modern, the work had to question its status in relation to what had gone before it (what particular trope was it displacing), it had to examine its own unrepresentable rules of presentation, and

it had to self-reflexively answer the question: is it, that is, this work of art here and now, is it happening?

To be reductive, it seems that there are at least two issues with this approach to the question of the aesthetic: the first is that it is slightly prescriptive; that modernism/postmodernism was somehow a matter of definition and not a matter of practices that did indeed cause definitions to be constantly revised. And secondly, there is a heavy unconscious formalism being played out in the prescription.

And I asked myself: what exactly was wrong with the work of the transavantgarde and the neo-expressionists who come in for a heavy serve from Lyotard? Well, for a start, their work was bound up with money. Living artists were actually going to banks and depositing money in accounts. Is it axiomatic that artists have to live in penury and garrets? It was, in those famous words, the realism of the Anything goes, the realism of money. But Lyotard himself had defended the very commodity system when he asked on another occasion, what in the end is wrong with the commodity system? Don't some very good things appear in the form of commodities (including one must add, books on critical philosophy)?

There is also the matter of artists pursuing careers in mass conformism. Granted we expect some originality from artists, but do we really expect them to be above, or so very different from everybody else in a society, most of whom do live lives of mass conformity? Isn't this expectation one of the constraints imposed by modernism? Be ahead of the rest, be different! And out of this difference repeat the system of values that you claim

to abhor, where every difference is a bad one, between the proper and improper – the propriety and impropriety examined in such depth in deconstruction, and something like the *différend* between Lyotard and Lacoue-Labarthe. It is a prejudice, with a minor collapsing of categories, that repeats the non-equation between the avant-garde and kitsch postulated by critical theory and high formalism – even though Lyotard specifically disavows this.

What did Lyotard make of popular sensibility that shows a marked preference and taste for the monstrous: the violent, the lewd, the pornographic, the terroristic, the horrific and the unauthentic (which is how one might characterise our cultural world)? Why does he prescribe an aesthetic that is clearly not in tune with the times – since all of these aesthetic categories are emphatically the sublime's excluded conceptual objects? It got me thinking that the contemporary aesthetic is not that of the sublime, but of the monstrous.

In '*Frankenstein* with Kant: A theory of Monstrosity or the Monstrosity of Theory,' Barbara Freeman argues that, between them, Kant's Third Critique and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* 'predict the form of contemporary theory which Derrida had called, when he brought the so-called French plague to America in the 60s, the as yet unnameable which is proclaiming itself in the terrifying form of monstrosity'.

Certainly there are fortuitous coincidences between The Third Critique and *Frankenstein*, between Immanuel Kant and Victor Frankenstein. In the end, Victor mirrors Kant's metaphysical desire to preserve the sublime for the faculty of

reason while refusing to accept paternity for its negativities (monstrosity, superstition, terror, passion, fanaticism). Kant's sublime always falls short of allowing one to lose one's head in feelings: the faculty of reason is the arbiter of feelings. Victor too was the creator of a monster he refuses to acknowledge, and who, by virtue of this rejection and his deafness to the monster's sweet voice, was ultimately destroyed because he didn't have a heart. And thus a certain act of neglect is installed at the interior of the speculative machinery right from the start.

Maybe it's true that the monster issuing from what Avital Ronell would call a bizarre Moonie wedding of Kant and Frankenstein, of philosophy and romanticism, is contemporary, paraliterary, deconstructive theory. Instrumental reason and the mastery of nature, mastery of humankind are legitimated in this union. Lyotard understood this and, at a certain cost to himself, pointed to this monstrosity in Marx and capitalism, in the death camps and Heidegger – and in a way took on the burden of philosophy's guilt (no doubt bequeathed by Adorno) and carried out a working through, a talking cure of exculpating the ineradicable stains of the fathers. And thus, despite minor différends or maybe because of them, someone whose memory we must cherish.