



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA

1998

# Remembering the memorial of Jean-Francois Lyotard

W. McClure

*Sydney Institute of Technology*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc>

## Recommended Citation

McClure, W., Remembering the memorial of Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Law Text Culture*, 4, 1998, 298-310.

Available at: <http://ro.uow.edu.au/ltc/vol4/iss2/20>

---

## Remembering the memorial of Jean-Francois Lyotard

### **Abstract**

Recently [early May] I attended the I.A.:P.L. 'Interrogating the Image' conference at the University of California, Irvine. During the conference, a last minnte decision was made to hold a memorial for Jean-Fran~ois Lyotard. Lyotard died on the 21st of April. Amongst those who spoke at the memorial were, Jacques Derrida, David Carroll, Mary Lydon, Hugh Silverman and Andrew Benjamin.

# **Remembering the Memorial of Jean-François Lyotard**

**William McClure**

(Recently [early May] I attended the I.A.P.L. 'Interrogating the Image' conference at the University of California, Irvine. During the conference, a last minute decision was made to hold a memorial for Jean-François Lyotard. Lyotard died on the 21st of April. Amongst those who spoke at the memorial were, Jacques Derrida, David Carroll, Mary Lydon, Hugh Silverman and Andrew Benjamin.)

A community of people, called philosophers, gathers in the lecture hall of a university. They gather for the purpose of holding a memorial to Jean-François Lyotard. These people come from a number of nations. The speakers are all members of a certain philosophical community; they are close friends of Lyotard. Some of the speakers are overcome by emotion as they speak. Their words get caught in their throat, they open their mouths, but no words come out. The audience is also moved. Some are skeptical, doubting the sincerity of the speaker's emotion. Although situated in the lecture hall, it is clear that there has been a departure from the usual forms of didactic and dialectical discourse. The senior member of the speakers, and the one that many look upon as a leader of the philosophical community, decries the use of a written text on such occasions. 'I am here to honour the memory of him that is bigger than me and bigger than us', he says. 'If I speak from a written text, I do

not honour his memory, in this context to speak from something that has been prepared beforehand is an act of narcissism'. 'I come unprepared so as to expose myself to the memory of him. To do this is also an act of narcissism – but it is a narcissism that is exposed to him'. That is how I remember some of the words of him who is thought to be great amongst us.

'To be great amongst us'. This would seem to be one of the criteria that has to be satisfied before a memorial will be held in one's honour. But not only this: the greatness of the one who has died is measured (to some extent) in terms of the greatness of those who speak at the memorial. This is more so the case when the orator claims that the one we remember is greater than all of us. The thought that can be evoked is: he who is speaking is great, and he is saying that the one that he speaking of is greater than all of us, this must mean that the one who is dead is by far the greatest. On the face of it, this gesture of self-effacement by the speaker, which also aims at the self-effacement of the living ('he who has died is greater than all of us assembled here'), can be understood as an attempt to break from a narcissistic representation of a self and a community. But on a more careful analysis of the type of discursive practice that a memorial involves itself in, it can be argued that the elevation of the dead to the status of hero (the great and virtuous), is supportive of an act of narcissism whereby the living elevate themselves by identifying themselves with the dead. This act of identification being made possible by the logic and pragmatics of a memorial.

Amongst the questions which we shall have to ask, is whether the pragmatics and logic of a classical memorial can operate in the same way (so as to institute an identification

between the dead and the living) in 'postmodernity'? It should also be asked, whether the pragmatics and logic of the memorial can effect an identification, when the only point of identification is that both the living and the dead are 'philosophers'? The name *Jean-François Lyotard* only compounds the problem posed by these questions: he is both a philosopher, and a philosopher who attempted to develop an 'honourable postmodernity' (1988: xiii). The manner in which I shall engage in these questions, and the mode by which I shall remember Lyotard's memorial, are also worth noting. In effect, what I attempt to do here is remember Lyotard's memorial by relying solely upon the works of Lyotard. It is as though I thought that the most responsible act of remembrance that I can offer, is to remember, first what Lyotard has said concerning the memorial, and then via this remembrance, pay tribute to his name.

According to Lyotard, the funeral oration (*logos epitaphios*) is a kind of epideictic genre of discourse; it is not 'dialectics, nor even forensic or deliberative rhetoric' (1988: 21). On the occasion of a memorial, 'it is not expected of the Assembly that it should take the floor, that it should debate, nor even that it should judge' (ibid). Rather, epideictic 'leans toward poetics. It is a matter of arousing in the addressee not phrases but those quasi-phrases, which are silent feelings'. If phrases take place (as indeed they are at this moment) 'they would sooner or later remove the equivocation from the pathos and dissipate the charm'. The silence of pathos is effected 'by the ubiquity of the situations of names'. Upon hearing a memorial: 'the addressee hears what is said about him as if he were not there, thus simultaneously alive as addressee and dead as referent, immortal (This ubiquity could be called

the fulfillment of desire, but that appellation is metaphysical.)’ (ibid).

The funeral oration makes use of a group of ‘paralogical operations’ (*métabolé, mimésis, peitho*) that, from the perspective of dialectics, have the effect of making possible the triumph of the weaker argument over the stronger. As Lyotard points out, the operation of the funeral oration ‘presupposes in the addressee a possibility, a *patheia*, an ability to be affected, a metamorphic ability (whose symbol is the cloud); in the addressor is presupposed a dissimulation, an occultation, the apocrypt (“it’s not me, it’s the gods or heroes who are phrased through my mouth: prosopopoeia of the dead”)’ (ibid).

The funeral oration not only poses a threat to an argumentative discourse, but also an ethical discourse. In respect to an argumentative discourse, rules are defined which aim at prohibiting the persuasive effects (enchantment, *goétéia*) of the operators. In respect to an ethical discourse, the silence of pathos that proceeds from the ubiquity of the situations of names, has the effect of turning the supreme virtue that one ought to ‘die well’ (ie. a beautiful death) ‘into a privilege of exception: that of being well born’ (1988: 105). The proper name of a collective (eg. Athenian) occupies the addressor, addressee and the referent instance of a narrative phrase. I, an Athenian, tell you, an Athenian, the narrative of our Athenian ancestors’ acts. The sense of this phrase is always, directly or indirectly, that of the ‘beautiful death’. It is an epic of exception. ‘We tell ourselves that we have died well’ (ibid). The reference here is Plato’s *Menexenus*. ‘Like everyone, Socrates wishes to ‘die well’, but he doesn’t want the

praise of 'well-dead' citizens made before living citizens to persuade the latter of their own virtue' (1988: 104).

On Lyotard's analysis, the problem here arises from the ubiquity of the situations of the proper name of the collective (eg. Athenian), and the slippage from the proper name to the first-person plural pronoun *we*. What is meant here? To understand this point we would need to explain what part the proper name plays in Lyotard's philosophy of phrases: names provide the only basis on which phrases from 'heterogeneous regimens or genres 'encounter' each other' (1988: 29). Contact, conflict, differends (legitimate and illegitimate) between phrase regimens and genres of discourse 'occur in proper names and in the worlds determined by networks of names' (ibid). This is a corrective for a notion of conflict (and politics) which privileges the cognitive phrase and the ethical phrase (ie. a conflict which takes place in reality and a conflict of wills).

In the classical form of the funeral oration, a differend is first attached to the proper name of a collective (eg. Athenians, French); and then the proper name is (illegitimately) substituted for the quasi-deictic first-person pronoun. It is worth breaking down the steps involved in the logic and pragmatics of a classical funeral oration. First, the funeral oration has as its instituted addressor someone who is appointed by the Council (as pointed out earlier, the orator is one who is recognised as great amongst us); it has as its addressee the Assembly of citizens; and it has as its referent the citizens dead in combat for the fatherland (1988: 20). Second, the logic of the oration is as follows: 'They, the dead, are heroes; they are Athenians; we, the living, are Athenians; we, the Athenians (dead and alive), are heroes'. Third, the move

from the proper name of the collective to the *we* is made as follows: (1) it is extended to the living – to the *I*, who is the orator, and to the *you*, who are the Assembly of addressees; and (2) it is further extended to the living and the dead – to the *I* and the *you*, and also to the *they*, who are the dead heroes.

From this we see that a differend attaches to the proper name of the collective. In the phrases *They, the dead, are heroes; they are Athenians*, the proper name *Athenian* is understood to apply to only those who have ‘died well’. It is a name which is earned by performing the supreme act of virtue. In dying well one’s individual name is incorporated into the name of the collective. This is the Athenian ‘beautiful death’ which involves ‘the exchange of the finite for the infinite, of the *eschaton* for the *télos*: the *Die in order not to die*’ (1988: 100). In the phrases *We, the living, are Athenians*, the proper name is attributed a cognitive value since it is understood to designate an entity that can be named in the historico-political world. The conflict between the phrases concerning the sense of the name is something which is irreducible. Where the rules which govern the formation and legitimation of the cognitive phrase are used also to judge the legitimacy of an ethical phrase this gives rise to a differend.

The last phrase of the funeral oration, *We, the Athenians (dead and alive), are heroes*, submerges the differend between the phrase regimens and submits both phrases to the stakes of the epideictic discourse: namely arousing in the addressee the silent phrases and the equivocation of pathos. As noted before, the aim of this discourse is to evoke in the addressee a vertigo, a state of mind in which the addressee is represented as alive and dead. This submergence of the differend is achieved by the use of the

*we* which covers over the parallogism whereby a subject-substance, or the permanence of a self, is thought to provide the substratum for both phrase universes. The proper name is simply the site of conflicts and differends between phrase regimens, whereas the 'phenomenological' *we* is the vehicle for a transcendental illusion (1988: 99).

The proper name simply allows the entity to be pinpointed in a world of names, whereas the *we*, 'halfway between the rigid (constant) designator that the name is and the 'current' designator that the singular pronoun is', makes possible an equivocation between a world of names and the extra-linguistic 'current' world of the *I-here-now*. Where the conflict between phrase regimens is given a phenomenological basis it is resolved by assuming a transcendental subject – the parallogism takes place when it is thought that this subject can be named and made the referent of a phrase.

Because the proper name, *Athenians*, is an empty designator it can receive the heterogeneity instituted by two phrase regimens. The sense attributed to the name can be validated in each case according to the rules governing the formation and sense of the phrases. Phrases can affect the referent of a single proper name by situating it upon different instances in the universes they present. The question of whether the *Athenians* are more the referent of an ethical phrase or a juridical phrase which identifies a community by means of legal conventions, cannot be resolved in favour of either sense. All that can be said is that in the space of independent phrases the name consecutively occupies the referent instance. Of course, in saying this one has recourse to a third phrase, a metaphrase, which refers to the two previous

phrases. In this last phrase, the name *Athenians* occupies the three previous situations, but 'encased', and it is now assigned another sense (it supplies the example of a referent whose senses are heterogeneous) (1988: 50). In turn one could make much the same point concerning the last phrase – *and so on*.

The proper name does not designate a reality; unlike the *we* it does not designate its object as a 'given', or an extra-linguistic permanence. The *we* on the other hand relates the instances of the universe presented by the phrase *we, the Athenians* (dead and alive), *are heroes*, back to a 'current' spatio-temporal origin named '*I-here-now*' (1988: 33). This substitution of the *we* for the proper name has the effect of reducing the equivocation of the proper name in favour of the permanence of a subject-substance – a 'we consciousness'. In the last phrase of the funeral oration it cannot be decided whether the proper name *Athenian* is the name which one earns because of a 'beautiful death', or whether it is the name which simply identifies the historico-political community to which one belongs. The splitting of the referent instance of the phrase (*Athenians*) into two entities, ethical community (Island of the Blessed) and historico-political community, corresponds to the equivocation of the funeral oration. The substitution of the *we* for *Athenian*, makes possible a resolution of this equivocation in favour of the designation of the permanence of an extra-linguistic subject-substance – that is the referent of both senses of the proper name. In the last phrase of the funeral oration, the *we* designates a subject-substance that is already ethical and real.

How then does all of this relate to Jean-François Lyotard's memorial? Does this memorial also institute the illusion that the

living, who speak and hear the memorial, are already identified with an ethical community (they) who have died well? Do the dead also speak to philosophers, to provide them with comfort, to tell them that they (living and dead) are fine?

My thoughts travel back to Irvine. It has been some time now since the event of that transportation that was so magically affective. It is not that I have now had time to recover myself, or distance myself from the pathological, but rather that the pathological has been felt as a critical judgment. In this moment of nonrecovery, there is no I who links onto the event, it is merely an 'it is felt that' that makes its way to the Island of the Blessed; strange as it sounds, in feeling the Island, the Island is felt as feeling. Instantaneous and spontaneous, the place of the Blessed has its moment of presence in a feeling. Laden onto this feeling are the categories of the understanding which are bent almost beyond recognition so as to talk to a mind desirous of the knowledge of places; places instituted by phrases. There is a falsity already underway – it is felt that this is the case. I shall borrow the dead man's idiom to say it.

(At this point I transcribe some notes that were quickly scribbled down at the time of the memorial.) There is no doubting the silencing effect of a memorial, and its power to move by means of pathos. But what is the place that is evoked by this speech? What proper name of a collective does the name *Lyotard* become incorporated into? Even if one accepts that Lyotard died a member of a modern deliberative democracy it is not a settled question as to what the identity of this community is. On Lyotard's own analysis of the pragmatics of a deliberative democracy, it is only after the question *what are we to be in this*

*current situation?* is answered, that it is possible to identify the community. The community might be *French*, but it might also be *Rich, Free, Knowledgeable, Powerful, Artistic* etc. By inquiring deep down into duty one runs the risk of being surprised that one ought to be French. It is not obligatory to be French, at the most being French can probably be established as a reality (1988: 148).

In the memorial held in the name of Lyotard, what proper name of a collective designates the *they* of *They, the dead are heroes*? As we have seen, in the classical funeral oration *they* are named *Athenians* (*They, the dead are heroes; they are Athenians*). Further, what is the *they* that *he/she* is substituted for? Death, after all, is the singular event *par excellence*. No *they* dies, only *he* and *she*. If we are to talk of this death then it can only be the death of a *he* and a *she*. It is only upon the occurrence of a 'beautiful death' that the singular pronoun can be substituted for the plural pronoun; and, for the moment, it is the very possibility of the beautiful death that is in question. If the *they*, and the proper name of the first phrase of the funeral oration, is a name or identification which one earns by being either willing or performing the supreme act of virtue, what is the collective identity, or proper name, which *he, Jean-François Lyotard* is incorporated into? As defined by Lyotard, the 'beautiful death' is only possible if death is prescribed as an alternative to another obligation: *Die rather than be defeated*. In a modern deliberative democracy this command might be: *Die rather than be enslaved or exploited*. On this analysis the beautiful death is chosen where the carrying out of an obligation is judged to be impracticable; and the *reason* to die forms the very bond of a *we*. This does not,

however, help us identify who the *we* might be that the name *Lyotard* is incorporated into.

On Lyotard's analysis, we might say that the identity of the *we* is left empty – the reason to die will only ever be established once it has been settled *what we are to be in the current situation*. It may be that the answer is *Rich*, in which case the command which authorises the beautiful death would be *Die, rather than be poor*. The identity of the *we* (ie. the one who legitimates the obligation, and who is the addressor of norms) would be filled out in terms of a genre of discourse whose stakes are wealth (perhaps it is the economic genre?). If the proper name for this *we* is also *French*, then it is to be understood that this name does not apply to those individuals who are prepared to die, and who die, in actualising potential judgments of the economic genre, but rather is the name which is applicable to a community simply by juridical convention.

It is said that the Athenian Assembly felt themselves transported to the Islands of the Blessed; that under the spell of the orator's use of the proper name and the *we* a transportation was felt. Here in this place the death of Lyotard is certainly represented, but it is not represented in terms of a narrative that is legitimated by the proper name of a collective identity. One of the speakers, who shall remain unnamed, uses this occasion to remind the assembly of what it is to be a philosopher. Is it possible that Lyotard's death, this singular death, is also the death of a philosopher? The proper name (Lyotard) remains (*he* does not remain): the senses and the differends that attach to it are potentially unlimited. Where is the name now? In the time of what phrase is it situated? Ethical time? It is felt that the name

*Lyotard* is now before *us*. It is felt that the name now approaches, and that the name has no referent amongst the living: *Lyotard 'is' dead*. We are here to pay our respects to his name – that is all that remains.

The Athenians could travel in time, but only along the diachronic axis of the before/after. Yes, they could travel back to the death of the Athenian hero, but this death was already situated in the narrated world legitimated by the proper name of a collective. He who is great amongst us, is conscious that this mode of travel is narcissistic. The suggestion is that the memorial that is required of us is not one that is situated by the discursive practices of a narrative. What memorial should be held in Lyotard's name? If the name *Lyotard* is to be respected then it is the very *occurrence* of that name that is to be remembered. Nothing less (and nothing more) than the occurrence of the name *Lyotard* should be remembered. *There is a name; Lyotard.*

Beyond the profane time of the narrative, the name can only be respected if the occurrence of the name is remembered. What are the modes of this remembrance? Once again I rely upon the works of a dead man. There are two modes: the eye's and the ear's; the imagination's and the will's; the occurrence of the name *Lyotard* is felt as the sublime and as an obligation/respect. These are the modes by which 'we' remember the occurrence of the name *Lyotard*. Before being situated by a genre of discourse, before being determined, it happens that there is the nominative phrase *Lyotard*; the name *Lyotard*, unleashed as an unconditioned temporality. *Respect* is a mode of memorial; it is the presence of the occurrence of the name felt subjectively by the capacity for desire. The *sublime* is a mode of memorial; it is

the presence of the occurrence of the name felt subjectively by the imagination (ie. by the power of synthesising in general).

The sublime is that negative mode of memorial that judges in pain and tears that, before the name *Lyotard* is incorporated into the name of a collective, there is no necessity governing how this name is to be linked onto or determined. 'We' remember his name, by recalling that the name is the site not of a home, but of war. What phrases are to link onto the nominative phrase *Lyotard*? What genre's of discourse are to provide the rules for judging the validity of the linkage? 'We' remember his name by remembering the nothing that separates the 'current phrase *Lyotard* ... from the next. 'We' have respect for the name *Lyotard*, if the determination of what phrase is to come next is made in the interest of actualising the unconditioned. If we respect the name *Lyotard*, the future (ie. what phrase is to come next) will be felt as a heterogeneity, not only because it is felt as that which is yet to come, but also because what is felt as the yet to come, is felt as the heterogeneity of ends. In postmodernity the approach of the future is not empowered by a single Idea, but by an irreducible heterogeneity of Ideas. The *we*, and the proper name of the collective into which the name *Jean-François Lyotard* may be finally incorporated must be deferred.

## Reference

Lyotard J-F 1988 *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute* Trans Georges Van Den Abbeele University of Minnesota Press Minneapolis