

Juddering

On Lyotard's *Discourse, Figure*

Art & Language

*Discourse, Figure** represents an early transition in Lyotard's eclectic philosophical development.¹ And yet it has acquired a certain authority in the field of Cultural Studies, attracting enthusiasts who are willing to make significant claims on its behalf: it overturns the distinction between theory and practice, it reconciles aesthetics with both historical materialist and psychoanalytical theories, and it returns us to Marx and Freud. Other readings add to a seemingly inexhaustible list of reconciliations, citations, profiles and trajectories. All are 'plaited' together with what Lyotard himself calls the 'wild beauty' and 'mad love' of art.

Callan and Williams describe the book as follows:

What is remarkable about *Discourse, Figure* is how Lyotard takes three separate strands of intellectual enquiry – (1) philosophy, in particular phenomenology, (2) structuralist linguistics and poetics and (3) aspects of Freudian theory – all of which he has mastered to a very high level, and plaits them together in such a way that each strand is continuously stretched and re-configured by the other strands to produce an approach to desire, artistic expression and being-in-the world that is much more complexly layered and subtle in its dynamics than any of its three component parts. The continuous stretching and re-configuring takes place on both micro and macro levels. The detailed and knowledgeable readings of material within the individual strands are always informed by fully internalized perspectives drawn from the other strands. For example, the notion of opacity in signification that Lyotard prises out of the linguistics literature owes an enormous amount to the concept of thickness explored in his reading of phenomenology, but there is a kind of blending: neither philosophy nor linguistics is made to predominate.²

Our sense of confusion and anomie dissipates for a moment. However promising their idea appears at first

sight, these commentators fail to show us clearly how the plait is put together – indeed, fail to show any plait at all, but rather a set of bittily concatenated fragments. Later, they drift into an absorbing description of a very interesting and potent troubadour verse. Their drift is, however, terminated in a predictable show of dummy force: the first line of the troubadour verse is 'I will make a song of pure nothing' and this is made by Callan and Williams into something that has an 'affirmative quality', a bit like an 'imaginary number': 'Lyotard's profound use of scepticism, multiple perspectives and negation in a search for truth has many affinities with what is going on in *Farai un vers de dreyt nien* and imaginary numbers.'³

Their understanding of imaginary numbers is Wikipedia sketchy and a bit wrong. They assert, for example, that imaginary numbers are 'contradictory' when they are actually best thought of as unfamiliar and strange. Does the scientific presentation of the metaphor matter a lot? Probably not. Would getting the notion of imaginary numbers right do any good? Probably not. Anyway, their excursion into a hopeless and homeless metaphor ends with a limp equation: the troubadour verse is like the square root of minus one (Lacan's phallus). So, they tell us, is *Discourse, Figure*.

We do not have the knowledge to harrumph or satirize like Sokal and Bricmont (and we certainly lack the desire) so we shall try to keep talking – to make something a bit more positive of our perplexity.

As philosophical autodidacts who made many unsuccessful forays into the lower slopes of analytical philosophy from set theory to modal logic, we should be happy to look for excitement and interest in funny juxtapositions and connections even if they aren't in the topological form that Callan and Williams promise.

Discourse, Figure was published in 1972 at about the same time as we were engaged in what became an

* Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. A. Huddek and M. Lydon, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2011. 544 pp., £30.00 hb., 978 0 8166 4565 7.

uncontrollable and finally unbearable artistic project, based on the idea of an index – a kind of map of a conversation, or conversation and more: not the trousers in the Beckettian tailor's shop, but the world outside his window containing all sorts of unconsidered things, trousers included.

Albeit patchy, self-taught and inexperienced, our efforts possessed a certain (mad) independence. They owed nothing to academic careers and, at that point, very little to an art market. This was an intellectual independence that grew out of the nervous breakdown of the aesthetic culture of high modernism. The breakdown had seen the emergence of a new genre (or possibly genres) which was textual in form but neither literature nor theory but art. It was disdained by proper artists and professional philosophers alike, as either hopelessly misguided or anti-aesthetic or both.

Around 1970 Art & Language had been approached by Daniel Templon and his partner Catherine Millet for an exhibition of some kind at his gallery on the Rue Napoleon. Our dance with the Galerie Daniel Templon was, however, always out of tune with the cultural music of the 6th Arrondissement. At the same time the seeming radicality of our project attracted the attention of a significant faction of the intellectual class, including, for a moment, Roland Barthes, Françoise Esselier, publisher of *VH101*, Bernard Ceysson of *Nouvelle Observateur*, and others. We also enjoyed contact with a fairly large group of avant-garde artists, from Olivier Mosset to Daniel Buren, as well as painters associated with the name 'Support Surface'. This latter grouping had been greatly impressed (both positively and negatively) by the publication in French translation of Clement Greenberg's writings, including *Art and Culture*. It was Greenberg who had made much of a dialectic of materials in modern painting. Strangely to us, for 'Support Surface' Greenberg was joined in an intellectual melange that included *Marx et Mao et Freud*. This was a brew that seemed exotic indeed. Except for Badiou, the Maoists have long evaporated, pursued by religion and one form or another of Cultural Studies, and while *Marx et Freud* seemed pretty odd, unable as we were to make much of a fist of reconciling Marxist materialism with Freudian theory, the connections made by our French colleagues seemed of some interest heuristically. The modernist nervous breakdown and its aftermath emphatically ruled out any kind of *jouissance* in the consuming of works of art, paintings in particular. Indeed, for ourselves, and perhaps to a slightly lesser extent for our French contemporaries (for whom structuralism of one kind or another had played the role that analytical philosophy

had played for us), the psychologized European modernist forms of the moral aesthetic, practical or theoretical, had long been superseded by the tougher talk that had surrounded American painting of the late 1940s to the 1960s, and even more by the theoretical efflorescence that had grown with the development of minimalism and eventually what came to be called 'conceptual art'.

Recognizing, then, that our Indexing project was mad, in its own way our reading of *Discourse, Figure* proceeded with the assumption that we ought to try to find a kind of solidarity with it as, according to John Mowitt's introduction, Lyotard's book is also 'mad but fully calculated'.

Phenomenology and its discontents

Lyotard's starting point is phenomenology. *Discourse, Figure* represents, it seems, an attempt in a series of elegant if overdense essays to introduce Freud into a melange otherwise dominated by Husserl and, most importantly for Lyotard, by Merleau-Ponty.

It is in unconscious desire, understood as an unbounded urge and as the primary force of the (Freudian) unconscious, that we are led past or helped to resolve (Lyotard is not clear) the enigma of 'the event'. According to Lyotard, this latter is something that phenomenology's insistence on the perceptual cannot cope with. Lyotard's 'solution' is to enact a reduction of the perceptual to its 'figural' matrix. As one operates this matrix, the realm of the primary processes of the (un)conscious is supposed to open up.

Art is of great importance here. As the figural matrix of the perceptible is discovered in unbounded desire, so a 'figural' aesthetics is suggested and this is a figural aesthetics that Lyotard wants certain specific forms of modern art to provide. This is a form of modern art associated, for example, with the development and celebration of the varieties of psychological spontaneity that are to be discovered, we were told (and perhaps continue to be told), in the *Pedagogical Sketchbooks* of Paul Klee. Left-handed drawing and the taking of lines for a walk had already been consigned to the academy in the 1960s. Indeed, even in the academy, it had begun to seem a particularly precious and coercive restriction upon the material and historical – indeed the radical potential of artistic culture. Pop art had already been naturalized and the Mighty Wurlitzer of the Spirit had been largely switched off, or left in the hands of the humourless and the reactionary. Lyotard switches on and plays aggressively on a rather less sonorous organ – the Freudian organ of desire. The 'wild beauty' of some modern art

comes from the energy it preserves (or has?), whereas in discourse, even the discourse of the unconscious, the energy is dissipated – left out.

Lyotard (sort of) opposes the ‘structuralism’ of Lacan, by emphasizing the libidinal energy that is described in Freud’s metapsychology and identified by Lyotard as its ‘economic dimension’. The Lacanian chain of signifiers is thus replaced by something we have to describe as a dynamic metaphysics – a metaphysics founded upon some notion of ‘energy’.

The questions of modernism as exemplified in postwar American painting were asked in the terms of its partly Kantian heritage that had themselves been converted into a ‘democratizing’ reflexivity. By ‘democratizing’ we merely wish to suggest that it was within the dialectical character of modern art – in its internal critical negativity – that a social dimension emerged, a social dimension that could essentially *outdo* the aesthetics that had been the custom of privilege. Lyotard’s metaphysics of energy confronts what was and is for us a much more homely dialectics of material and institutional critique. And in this we include – or, rather, would have included – most forms of ‘libidinal intensity’, unless displaced and distanced so as to be mere topic or the subject matter of a critical negativity. But Lyotard has taken something from Lacan’s ‘The unconscious is structured like a language’, and *Discourse, Figure* contains lengthy passages of a kind of analysis that might seem bogus to those not accustomed to it. This is the working of a figural aesthetics that we see developed (if that’s the word) even further in *Libidinal Economy* (1974, trans. 1993). A rutting we will go. In the end, though, the ‘figural’ aesthetics can perhaps only be worked out in practice – as applied to analyses of painting, cinema and so on. So, we repeat to ourselves the injunction that we must suspend our sense that Lyotard’s project was already an anachronism in 1972 and see where it leads now.

There’s not an awful lot of practical aesthetics in *Discourse, Figure* but it does seem to owe a lot to, or at least share, some resources not only with Roland Barthes but also with Gilles Deleuze. Indeed, *Discourse, Figure* is, in part (or whole) a philosophy of desire, but it shares very few of its origins with the earlier Freud-and-psychoanalysis-inspired aesthetic theories that Klee represents rather limply. Lyotard’s taste does, however, owe something to the tradition that began with Baumgarten, where aesthetics is concerned with the direct sensuous apprehension of the actual. Indeed his attempted reading of Frege could almost be seen as an exposition of Baumgarten’s semiotics:

visual signs and poetic words are in the end functionally no different. His critique (if that’s what it is) of Merleau-Ponty and to a lesser extent Husserl (phenomenology cannot cope beyond – or, ultimately, with – the ‘event’) might be thought of as continually piling a sort of outlandish detail upon a quite conventional theory. The leafiness of trees is phenomenologically damaged by any awareness of (or any recourse to) the discourse of botany. What we need to do is to get inside tree-leafiness and its place in our unconscious.

From the late 1950s to the early 1970s advanced art-school orthodoxy insisted upon unreflective but creative drives and instincts. ‘You can’t verbalize here, we do drawing, we do exercises that will lead you to a sort of discovery and that is something “personal”’. Work deemed by lecturer-bullies to be ‘personal’ (it had a look) received praise. Work that was ‘too cerebral’ did not. Indeed, it produced shame. Lyotard warns, however, against a Freudian aesthetics that is too simplistic. He points out that Freud himself was not immune to the view that artworks and works of literature are (merely) symptoms – the work of art is the externalization of deep-seated phantasies. ‘The ego’s role is that of reality in the unconscious; it is the damnation of repression which does not produce art works but diverts energy towards verbalization (knowledge).’ However, Lyotard goes on to observe wittily that the Kleinian and Winnicottian transitional object is there to stop adults going mad in the attempt to become children again (a powerfully academic convention in 1960s’ advanced art teaching). But, predictably for him, all of this Kleinian dialectical stuff smacks of Hegelianism, not connected well enough to desire.

Lyotard makes much of Klee’s *Pedagogical Sketchbook* though. Long uncool, even if it is not uninteresting, it was an important browbeating weapon of academic modernism before Greenberg began, perhaps paradoxically, to democratize it. Confident, coercive and thoroughly bourgeois – the more so in virtue of its claims to a gleaming universality and ‘basicness’. Its association with the discourse (in the bourgeois faction) of the Left had done nothing to redeem its practical pointlessness. You could only make one kind of art with it: biomorphic or geometrical abstraction bereft of rigour or risk, abstraction rooted in a tissue of comfortable psychological nostrums guaranteeing safety for the educated consumer.

And this consumer’s safety was guaranteed to some extent by the adolescent (artistic) drama of the death drive. It is the death drive that drives Lyotard’s unconscious of unbounded imagery. He embarks on a search for the energy of the libidinal urge in certain

forms of modern art. He leads us there through a curious labyrinth that hides within it some indescribably awful examples of the rebus as well as Frege's *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* ('On Sense and Reference', 1892). The rebuses are too weak to support the weight he places on them, and he does not enlighten us at all about what Frege's project was. He ransacks them selectively in a search for a way out of the constraints of semiological formalism. But, really, both are small minotaurs, there to extend their hands from the shadows – to inspire a sort of fear, or perhaps fatigue.

Sensibility and reference

Having 'disposed' of phenomenology as metaphysically limited – falling short as a metaphysics of desire (it's not at all surprising that Merleau-Ponty might not supply much in this regard, but it is his propitious role to be gone beyond, exceeded) – Lyotard moves sideways into an exposition of Frege that is indeed a little odd. Now, as we've admitted, we're artists; we're not qualified to pronounce significantly on *Über Sinn und Bedeutung*; but there is something shallow and pointless about Lyotard's take on the old logician par excellence. His exposition sticks more or less to Frege's words, indeed follows Frege's exposition, without providing the reader with any real sense of the historicity of his project and indeed without making any reference to the enormous amount of commentary, criticism and discourse that surrounded Frege's work on arithmetic and logic. While Frege is put to some use perhaps in furthering Lyotard's cause, it is not without the strangeness of a non-interpretation. He ends with a summary rehearsal of Leibniz's law of identity, that leaves it dangling as somehow relevant to his purpose and to Frege's. Of course, the 'Law' has to matter to Frege (if 'a' and 'b' are identical, what applies to 'a' applies to 'b' – or what is true of 'a' is true of 'b' and vice versa, *salva veritate*), but it's not at all clear why Lyotard chooses this to end a chapter. Perhaps it's a kind of wheelie. But, of course, Leibniz is a block-capital entry in the address books of French literature and theory from Proust to Deleuze.

Lyotard asserts that 'the nature of the relation of identity consists in the movement of substitution or selection; and this movement takes place in a positional space that is not where the terms are positioned.'

Now, as far as we get it, Frege's theory of representation was concerned with the development of formal languages for mathematics and science. The distinction between sense and reference was made by Frege in part to cope with propositional attitudes. The

sense of an expression is supposed to be a mode of presentation for, or of, its referent – it deals with the cognitive properties of expressions. And sense determines reference – if two expressions share a sense, they have the same reference. The notion of *Sinn* is supposed by some to offer a solution to the problem of intensional objects – à la Brentano, or an escape from the weird Dilthey proposal that when we think of an 'object' like 'Radical Philosophy' we think 'Radical Philosophy-ly'. Frege, as far as we understand him, did allow that expressions can have sense without reference and that a term's sense was somehow independent of the existence of the reference. But for Frege, interested as he is in developing formal systems, the thoughts that we have when we're writing or reading fiction are of absolutely no concern. A sentence with a fictional 'referent' is for Frege a sentence with *no referent*. The sentence can neither be true nor false and 'logic' doesn't apply to it. Now, various logicians have 'solved' Frege's problem in various ways. Some have even suggested that one can have a logic that does not require a reference for all significant terms (a 'free logic'), and others in the early twentieth century have commented and puzzled. However, all would agree, we think, that Frege was the 'father of modern logic' even though he has been made to say many different things in many different places. While Lyotard's non-interpretation provides an eerie poesis, he certainly does not suggest anyway that empty expressions in Frege's terms can be made to do work of a kind. Simply to affirm that an expression of fiction is an expression with a sense that we can sort of share across the surface of texts is to say almost nothing that Frege didn't. (Actually, we're not sure that that's even what he – Lyotard – says.) One might say that he simply quotes Frege and fluffs what commentary he makes by pointing Frege towards literature.

But, of course, the sense–reference distinction does present a real temptation. For us in the 1960s, it was something on which (artistic) worlds could be built. Lyotard's view of – or rather his invocation of – Frege appears to conscript Frege's intention to a (kind of) support for a *vouloir dire*, and *vouloir dire* is later to be transformed into the desire that drives the poetic and the metaphysical. He had not quite anticipated – or caught up with – the poststructuralist notion that there is no *vouloir dire* to be found and that we had better be satisfied with convention augmented by our own writerly efforts.

Lyotard *does* want to say, we think, that his metaphysics of desire uncovers or solves 'the enigma of the event' that would presumably have been opaque to

Frege (it is) as much as to Merleau-Ponty. *Discourse, Figure* proposes a figural dimension that opens up the work of the unconscious. He's anxious, as we've suggested, not to become a Lacanian acolyte, but in *Discourse, Figure* he didn't quite set out a fully dramatic theory of libidinal energy, so much as a demonstration based on a few exemplary and rather menacingly old-fashioned 'cases' that forty years on look primitively sexist: the shudder caused by recently published chit-chat of Bernard-Henri Lévy and his mate Michel Houellebecq come to mind.



Art & Language, *One of These Strings is Exhausted* [X (detail), 2004.

Lytard wished to locate the ethical dimension of the world in art. This is art approached through a particular and very *strong* psychoanalytical theory. For us, in the late 1960s, it was that very psychoanalytical tendency that had made abstract art a safe haven of bourgeois consumption. And, indeed, cognate observances form the discourse of the conservative romanticism that makes post-Duchampian rubbish all right for corporate ingestion. To this, Lyotard brings a version of Freud that is also heavily loaded with the theology of *jouissance*, something sixteenth century – orgasm as a kind of small death. It's not that we don't understand that long-lasting tradition in French theory that there be overexcited readers, and there are indeed circumstances where it seems to be of great help enlightening one's sense of readership and indeed writership, but here, without Barthes's steadying hand, we seem only to have reached a pseudo-ethics of excess. Lyotard's hypertext of Civilization and its

Discontents pushes the death drive so far forward that we lose sight of any remnant of Freudian naturalism. What passes for naturalism is to be found as part of a strange and elaborate overworking of the syntactical modalities of 'A child is being beaten':

The phantasy 'A child is being beaten' is indeed one of the forms of transgression. There is a 'horizontal' scansion of the represented of the beating, of the *signified*: 'X is beating Y'. But to the extent that it is composed of superimposed layers, that it is a layered figure, this phantasy is the transgression of that form. The 'vertical' scansion that transforms the figure 'the father is beating the child' into the figure 'a child is being beaten' via 'I am being beaten by my father' obeys the compulsion of enjambement [*rejet*], of the run-on line, namely the compulsion of regression, and the function of this enjambement is to overload the apparatus with stimulus so that the consummation of *jouissance* results, but this also brings death closer. The figures in each phase are disfigured one by one as a result of the superimposition of a new figure engendered by the enjambement. The order that emerges, in which desire lets itself be caught (the order 'X is beating Y'), is continually deconstructed. Now we understand that the principle of figurality that is also the principle of unbinding (the baffle) is the death drive: 'the absolute of anti-synthesis': Utopia.⁴

'A child is being beaten' can be (sort of) inferred from the active 'X is beating a child'. 'A child is being beaten' corresponds to a masochistic transformation – a 'second phase'. Lyotard then says that we have seen 'An exact analogue of an instance raised by the rebus' where part of the text 'passes into figure form and ceases to be immediately obvious to the gaze having been transformed into an outline'. This statement is hard to unpack; a bit mad. But is it any the worse for that? Is Lyotard saying that a syntactical shift from the active to the passive voice is somehow equivalent to the changing of the phrase 'Un essaim d'abeilles' into a logical shadow in order somehow to drive a picture? It simply isn't analogous except in the absurd sense that the shift from 'X is beating a child' to 'A child is being beaten' is 'analogous' to anything that displaces one linguistic description with a quasi-homophonic 'equivalent'. It's worse.

While the operative phantasies in a person's life are not occasional, sporadic and thematically unconnected but form a schema in which particular phantasies are variations (and indeed while an example of such a schema is 'A child is being beaten'), the themes and dominant emotions are interpersonal: envy, jealousy, conflicts between the desire for gratification and fear of provoking another's anger or disapproval – and so on.

But one of the threads that Lyotard twiddles is the idea that words are somehow in a sort of conflict with things. We need not say loudly that they're not. Words are interpreted by mapping onto words and what is meant cannot be exhaustively put into words – not that there is anything else to put it into. This is no conflict. It may be drama, and indeed some of the drama may have libidinal intensity. But all of it?

In Lyotard's metaphysics-made-of-aesthetics we aren't ever still. We are compelled, driven and overwrought. The unrepresentable seems to be a fixed category and libidinal energy or some other Deleuzian antic redeems it as emphatic artistic virtue. According to Lyotard we do not, for example, exercise our imaginations conversationally or discursively as best we can, or pretend, as a working hypothesis. All our aesthetic work is overrun by our unconscious, and this is an unconscious that – for a reason not made clear to his readers – is an aesthetics-led escape from the metaphysical limitations of phenomenology. Even though he writes critically of those who drive themselves mad trying to be children, the idea of a presence or an imagining that is not beaded in sweat seems increasingly impossible as the chapters of *Discourse, Figure* unfold – if that is what they do.

We can begin to guess how all this charivari has fed the academic Lounge Bossa of later years. In some of what passes for Cultural Studies, desire in one guise or another will do all the work of 'analysis' you need it for, and the sublation of the post-Duchampian knick-knack immediately becomes both possible and necessary. Lyotard's book now has significance in far more go-ahead places: because it operates 'beyond the theory practice distinction', because it 'overturns' these oppositions and provides a powerful base for the nonsense of research for practice-based PhDs. But, we want to whimper, is that all there is available to us artists and sometime critics cognitively? We form arguments about works of art and, while they may or may not be driven by a whole Hotel Carlton de Lille worth of libidinal energy, we usually try to give ourselves (and others) reasons, as best we can. And these are rarely quasi-structural analyses, even though they may form the beginning of such performances and others.

Of course, we can't change all the facts about Pollock's *Autumn Rhythm*, but we can add this and that to our knowledge. But once we know what we know, the chances are that we have to live with the emotional (or whatever) response we make to the painting. And we can hypothesize – we can imagine some other set of conditions or properties of the work (perhaps quite

minor, or to be found in other works by Pollock) and ask if these might have made us respond differently. Our aesthetic responses are partly driven by a sense of the category, often complex sets, not simply types like painting or sculpture, for example. If we load *Autumn Rhythm* with all the 'witches Sabbath of a Doomsday aspect' metaphors of Francis O'Connor, then we're likely to find its spatters full of 'wild beauty'. On the other hand, if we get a bit closer even to Clement Greenberg and ask ourselves about the colours, we might find it rather limply decorative. But if we do think that we have to become (over)excited and (over)dramatic in the face of works of art, we may have to ask whose interests we are likely to be serving. The contemporary art of the 'new' dispensation is much addicted to drama. The adolescent taste that puts Munch's *The Scream* in the tabloids serves an essentially material interest. Artists are authentic and somehow tortured, etc., etc. And neither of these arguments about *Autumn Rhythm* needs to be coercive – indeed, we might find ourselves confronting our own desires. Our encounters with works of art are complex. Desire is one among a long list of mediating and determining conditions. Of course, the truth about anything can be aesthetically relevant. How we respond to art depends on some almost ineffable things, including, no doubt, the unconscious and the wishes and desires associated with it. And to know more about ourselves psychologically makes a difference just as, no doubt, does some knowledge about the biology of human development. And such knowledge and opinion will make some sort of difference to what we think about the art we may encounter. We may respond in certain ways because we have this sort of knowledge. Well, OK. But it's part of a whole wide range of knowledge-like stuff, most of which won't easily sit on a single surface. It will often be mutually incommensurable. And these conflicts are often what we have to do our best to make something aesthetic of. Have we just talked a Fiscourse, Digure here?

What are we to do with the knowledge that the justifying mode of mid-table European modernism is a discourse that lives and reflects the interests of a well-heeled social group with access to the best restaurants – that seeks to keep other forms of power in the hands of such elites (medical, psychiatric, financial)? This theory, this justifying mode, is indeed a programme of power enhancement for the group it serves. It may nevertheless play a significant role in some more or less genuine aesthetic sentiments (that demand to see lines being taken for a walk).

At some point in the 1960s a set of possibilities arose in the USA, and in New York City in particular, that pointed the way elsewhere. Our repertoire of aesthetic interests was offered a new genealogy that seemed powerfully to confront the old European observances. These were historical and technical possibilities that did not seek the power-enhanced burdens of European modernism. Indeed, it was this loading of the salon-talk of the elite that made the European stuff fussy, relational and timid. What such technical and historical developments emphasized (even as – or because – some fad or other came into fashion) was the contingency of our aesthetic commitments – of our ‘sensibility’. The space of aesthetic reason (or discourse, perhaps) was changed by the intervention – perhaps sometimes in disguise of a series of class interests and identifications. This sense of the shape and content of our aesthetic landscape is certainly possible – or persuasive indeed – as one that is made out of a libidinal economy, with its ridiculous and overdramatic impulses. And yet, as Lyotard attempts to add bits to his theory, what are we shown? Rebuses of a supernatural tiresomeness and naffness are subject to a treatment that is either obvious or difficult to follow and, more to the point, deadening to the soul. For all its discontents, civilization is still the matrix of our necessarily difficult, broken and fissiparous experience of art.

A Charlus Discourse

On page 281 we are told that the artwork is indeed ‘real’ but also virtual:

The relinquished part itself shows scars of the struggle over its occupancy between the pleasure principle and that of reality. ‘Reality’ is not the fullness of being as opposed to the void of the imaginary, since it preserves some lack within itself, and this lack is of such importance that in it – in the rift of in-existence at the heart of existence – the work of art takes place. The artwork is real, it can lend itself to being named and manipulated before witnesses, assuring them there is indeed, here and now, a painting or a statue. But it is not real, the expanse of Claude Monet’s *Water Lilies* does not share the same space as the room in the Orangerie Museum, and Auguste Rodin’s *Balzac* at the Raspail–Montparnasse intersection in Paris is not erected on the same soil as the trees lining the boulevard. In front of the image’s powerful consistency, reality is so fragile that in the contest between the two expanses, of the art work and of the world in which it is placed, it is the first that seduces and attracts the second to it: the basement of the Orangerie allows itself to be sucked through its walls into the light-filled mist floating over the painted pools, while the statue’s backward

tilt endows the boulevard with its particular slope leading down to Saint-Germain. Not only do the presence of art works attest to the object’s absence and to the world’s scant reality, but the absence that is ‘realized’ in them pulls toward itself the given’s purported existence and reveals its lack. The world throws itself into artworks because there is emptiness within it and because the artist’s critical expression provides a shape to our object-seeking desires. What is crucial here is that there is, at the tip of the axis of designation, an image, which we have assumed is ungraspable. As such, it may be no different from the ‘real’ object: the ‘grasping’ does nothing more itself than provide images; it is probably no more phantasmatic than sight, impregnated as it is by vision. There is but the slightest difference between having one’s head in the clouds and being in them.⁵

Blimey!

While it is indeed true that a picture is not a picture of the place it is hung in, nor is it literally the space in which it is exhibited, the power of Monet’s *Water Lilies* to ‘suck’ the basement of the Orangerie (through its walls?) seems a bit – here we go again – overwrought and indeed mystical rather than problem-setting. Is Lyotard simply adding a bit not so much to Merleau-Ponty but to Heidegger? The language at least in the present translation is highly reminiscent of the language of ‘origin’ and ‘thrownness’, the opening up of a world even though the Gods have fled.

Perhaps for us as readers with no academic connection to, and indeed with very little detailed knowledge of, the landscape of French philosophy, Lyotard’s text supplies a (marginally) erotic charge akin to Proust’s Charlus ‘discourse’. Indeed, while we see Lyotard quoting Paul Klee’s assertion that the eye takes in a painting by grazing on it, Barthes (a little earlier) describes the speech of Baron Charlus as grazing (or perhaps, just perhaps, juddering).

The ‘Charlus-Discourse’ is thus neither a non-discourse nor a non-method, but an erotic ‘champ, un jeu de forces, d’intensités mobiles’ (‘field, a play of forces, of mobile intensities’) in which a reassuring spasm of the signified is always put off until later. Barthes says that Charlus ‘broute le discours’ (‘grazes on/judders discourse’). He speaks ‘comme une tondeuse, un marteau-piqueur: il broute voracement le discours’ (‘like a lawnmower, a pneumatic drill: he grazes voraciously on discourse/judders discourse voraciously’). ... Charlus, the reader, and Marcel are all engaged in ‘grazing’, and that this could be understood as something ‘erotic’. We take our time, and in doing so we build deferrals. Neither Charlus’s discourse nor the act of reading it could ever be said to amount to an idly methodical process that is oriented towards a stable goal or an

‘obvious meaning’, or what Barthes calls a ‘protocole d’opérations pour obtenir un résultat’ (‘protocol of operations with a view to obtaining a result’). The discourse of Charlus the Jackhammer is a violently intermittent, mottling of signs, a voluptuous patchiness and layering of *signifiance*.⁶

As Barthes (and with Marcel) listens to the sounds – the music – of Charlus’s affective explosions, he concedes that his fantasies of semiological structuralism can’t deal with the erotic content (you could call it ‘loss’) of Proust’s novel. He faces, or wants to face up to, an extreme force of affect. In a way, in following close behind Barthes of the later 1960s and early 1970s (we are aware that the specific Barthes text in question is from 1977) with a Deleuzian metaphysics, Lyotard re-creates a Charlus Discourse, grazing or juddering his way through phenomenology and Freud to his own metaphysics of desire. And this is a desire, an affective explosive potential, that leaves those of us who came to art through material and technical discourse – a sense of the dialectical tensions in material tradition – largely silent. The field is opened for the Charlus Discourse or the even more extended smooth and homogenizing music of Cultural Studies to play its part in the post-Duchampian heritage.

In the atonality of *Discourse, Figure* one detects the ghostly voice of Roland Barthes that segues into something Deleuzian. And as is usual in French theory, *À la recherche* presides to the extent that we’re tempted to search the novel for characters who might be matched with Lyotard, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault and all. One promising suggestion – promising in the sense that one gets a brief illusion of clarity – is that Lyotard is adding to and reading *À la recherche* in the most writerly way possible. Or is it we who must do that work?

It’s not entirely clear if Lyotard has entirely avoided structuralism. His diagrams owe a lot to the Barthesian ‘phantasy’ – the structuralism that Barthes disallowed but never abandoned. Lyotard was never in the same position in that he was never party to the development of ‘tradition’ in 1950s’ structuralism. He touches on some familiar literary and philosophical matters that, compared to Deleuze or Derrida or even Barthes, seem rather new to him. He produced Charlus-like a survey of sorts, something woven from gaudy rags, perhaps. His journey from discourse to a (sort of) non-discourse takes byways that encounter a growing crowd of voices that are joined – or rather overlaid – in the hope of a new metaphysics of desire. But it is not entirely clear how his metaphysics can account for what he calls the ‘thickness’ of the world.

His arguments do not, for example, take us persuasively from (philosophical) discourse (or language) to dreamwork. Instead, the suggestion is that somehow we ‘need’ a ‘metaphysics’ made mostly of dreamwork. Similarly, it is not at all clear whence this necessity came, unless the crowd shares in some undeclared version of authenticity – an authenticity built upon its internal Freudian discourses.

While the reader can assuredly begin to understand Lyotard’s sporadic arguments regarding a metaphysics of ‘desire’, some doubts necessarily remain about their power to generate anything like a metaphysics of belief in terms of structures that are at least coherent rather than themselves writerly. It seems somewhat odd to suggest – or to invite the conclusion – that Lyotard’s condensations and displacements, his showmanship regarding the omnipotence of ‘thought’, could provide anything of the kind. To have suggested that some art shows the unrepresentable was, even in 1972, as commonplace an affirmation as it is possible for a critic to make. Yet Lyotard’s *Discourse, Figure* is as insipid as it is vivid, as bereft of detail as it is full: *il broute*. But is this really *brouter* in the sense of ‘to judder’ or ‘to graze’? There are bits in the machine that are out of whack. Lyotard hasn’t bothered to fit them together. But, Charlus-like, the machine grinds on, grazing and juddering.

He loses his thread like Charlus, grazes, jumps and leaves us work to do. There’s no point in moaning for too long about the overwrought idealism of what, on a good day, might be called his ‘thesis’. A (sort of) metaphysics of the unconscious, or of unconscious desire does indeed take one to a ‘position’ beyond the ‘events’ of the phenomenologists, but there have been other ways out of this idealist cul-de-sac. However idealist such structuralists-cum-poststructuralists as Barthes and Derrida are, their projects are somehow grounded in ways that Lyotard’s, at least in 1972, isn’t. However bare the Derridian metaphysical cupboard, he does propose a kind of answer to his phenomenological predecessors in the form of the intention-busting archigramme. However much Barthes is content to remain firmly ‘within’ this or that text, there remains just a faint and reassuring shadow of – dare we say it – quasi-empirical reference, even if it’s only to be found in the system of difference(ance).

In its smoothest and least Charlus-like aspects, Lyotard’s post-phenomenological metaphysics has the aspect of a *confection*, made of an overused and little analysed notion of the thickness (the non-discursive, non-textual) part of the world. The confection is, it should be clear by now, not served by

any conventionally developing argument in the book. There are, however, quasi-sacred moments that stand out in the confection. When *Discourse, Figure* touches a work of art, for example, it is as if the reader has been admitted to a room that houses a near fetish, only to be left alone with it, accompanied perhaps by some exquisite music and a rather brittle and oblique remark.

In being thus left alone to contemplate, the reader/viewer has been invited to consider something characterized in a Lacanian or – its other – a Deleuzian way, as ‘the unrepresentable’, as a fixed category and a partial mystery. While Lyotard appears to be telling us that meaning is not the effect of discourse alone, his metaphysics is a metaphysics of ‘deconstruction’, and his are interpretations of interpretations. And while he wants, interestingly, to avoid Lacanian structures, his work lacks the sense of the real discourse of psychoanalytical patients (subjects?). Instead it remains very aloof, at a rather Spenglerian level of allusive ‘theory’. And this is, in the end, coercive. Its deconstructions speak to yet more and more cultural theory that aspires to writerliness and fails. Better perhaps to let *Discourse, Figure* render you intellectually homeless – a reader of the book who won’t last long.

Our artistic efforts of the early 1970s, philosophically faltering and crazy as they may have been, were the traces of striving. We were chasing a set of vanishing aspirations and possibilities in the forms of a new genre that was characterized by an emergency conditional – a new genre produced and imagined by non-philosophers, decidedly *pour soi* one might say. The Lyotard of *Discourse, Figure* is a philosopher of considerable expertise and experience. A bit of this stuff was new to him, but fully *en-soi* he was. His demonstrations and flourishes are indeed bibliographically formed, made of a lot of philosophy. We are left not with a new genre or dispensation but something not quite Barthesian, not quite Deleuzian, not quite Lacanian. Lyotard’s grazing/juddering has not quite produced a new genre unless we refuse to read but *look* instead. Perhaps that would give the book itself the distinctive ‘thickness’ that would transcend its text. As it is, then, it weighs 1.5 kg and measures 23.5 × 16.0 × 4.0 cm and is coloured blue, white, black and yellow on the cover.

Notes

1. From the 1950s Lyotard’s voice had been associated with the Socialisme ou Barbarie movement and, after a falling-out with Castoriadis in the 1960s, with its less prominent rival Pouvoir Ouvrier. Published in French

in 1971 by Klinksieck, *Discourse, Figure* was Lyotard’s thesis, presented for a doctorate in literature. It represents his first sustained foray into (one of) the genres of French Theory. After developing and augmenting some of the motifs of this thesis in the *Économie Libidinale* of 1974 (*Libidinal Economy*, trans. 1993; see below) Lyotard’s philosophical tastes were stimulated by the Wittgensteinian notion of ‘language games’. He achieved universal renown in 1979 with the publication of *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984.

2. Guy Callan and James Williams, ‘A Return to Jean François Lyotard’s *Discourse, Figure*’, *Parrhesia, A Journal of Critical Philosophy* 12, 2011, pp. 41–51; p. 41.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
4. Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, p. 355.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
6. Thomas Baldwin, ‘Grazing with Marcel Proust’, forthcoming in *Modernist Eroticism: European Literature after Sexology*, ed. Anna Katharina Schaffner and Shane Weller (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2012). The idea of *Discourse, Figure* as a ‘Charlus Discourse’ was inspired by this article. All subsequent mistakes and misapprehensions are ours. Baldwin elaborates Barthes’s contention as follows:

His use of ‘brouter’ here allows us to return, with some caution, to ... Barthes’s distinction in *The Pleasure of the Text* between two diets of reading. In French as in English, ‘grazing’ is the consumption of grass and other green stuff by animals, suggesting an activity that is relatively leisurely and casual. In more colloquial English, it can also refer to the act of eating ‘informally, taking small quantities of food at frequent but usually irregular intervals’ (*OED*), and in French, as noted earlier, ‘brouter’ can also be used to describe the reciprocating or juddering motion of certain tools and mechanical devices. While the second definition in English might suggest an intermittence or haphazardness of sorts, this sense is clearly more prominent in the second definition of the French verb. Now, the reader of modern texts may ‘graze’ or ‘mow’ (*tondre*) in order to rediscover ‘le loisir des anciennes lectures’ (‘the leisure of bygone readings’), but he or she does so ‘avec minutie’ (‘scrupulously’). This reader reads – grazes – at his or her leisure, without falling into what Barthes refers to elsewhere as ‘oisiveté’ (‘idleness’). A minute and scrupulous attention to textual detail affords him or her access to the ‘erotic’ enchantment of the signifier (‘l’enchantement du signifiant’) and ‘la volupté de l’écriture’ (‘the voluptuousness of writing’). The polysemy of the French verb is important in *How to Live Together*, where Barthes explains what he means by ‘brouter’: ‘couper par soubresauts en parlant de certains outils, agir par à-coups en parlant d’un frein, d’un embrayage, d’une machine’ (‘when speaking of certain tools, to cut jerkily, in relation to a brake, a clutch, a machine, to jerk violently’). He says nothing about feeding. Nevertheless, ‘voracement’ (‘voraciously’) suggests a particularly ravenous oral consumption on Charlus’s part: feeding and jerking combined. Bearing each of these possibilities in mind, we may see them touch.