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Liotard's Politics of the Sentence

Meili Steele

La politique est la menace du différend.

—*Le Différend*

Since its appearance in 1978 Jean-François Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne* has been subjected to a number of attacks from many camps: it ignores nonlinguistic forces; it presents an irresponsible Romantic aestheticism; it reinstates rather than deconstructs the logic of identity; it valorizes a naive liberal pluralism.¹ Lyotard's major work since then, *Le Différend* (1983), is at once a development of and a retreat from the narrative pragmatics that he announces in his earlier work. First, he retreats from the inter-

1. See Fredric Jameson, Foreword to Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Seyla Benhabib, "Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard," *New German Critique* 33 (1984): 103–26; Richard Rorty, "Habermas and Lyotard on Postmodernity," in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard Bernstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985); and David Ingram, "Legitimacy and the Postmodern Condition: The Political Thought of Jean-François Lyotard," *Praxis International* 7 (1987/8): 284–303, and "The Postmodern Kantianism of Arendt and Lyotard," in *Review of Metaphysics* (forthcoming). For a sympathetic reading of Lyotard, see Geoff Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1988).

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disciplinary scope of his earlier work to the texts of philosophy and thus minimizes his sketchy speculations about social and economic conditions. In addition, he shifts his focus from narrative to the delineation of types of sentences and discourses so as to mark out the moves by which one type can silence or oppress the idiom of another. Lyotard wants to flush out the conflicts between sentences and reveal their *différends*: “A *différend* takes place between two parties when the ‘settlement’ of the conflict that opposes them is made in the idiom of one while the injury from which the other suffers does not signify in that idiom.”² These conflicts emerge not simply at the level of the word (e.g., the meaning of proper names) but at the level of the sentence, or, more precisely, in the relationship between two sentences. Thus, politics is not a genre of discourse itself but “the question of linkage [between sentences]” (*D*, 200). Lyotard’s analysis of the *différend* is an important philosophical intervention in the study of language and politics. If his previous recommendation that we “wage a war on totality” and “be witnesses to the unrepresentable” (*WPM*, 82) seemed like an appeal to neo-Romantic idealism, his new work does indeed offer an incisive critique of the pragmatics of oppression. The first part of this essay will give an exposition of Lyotard’s argument, while the second part will address limits and powers of his work.

Before jumping into Lyotard’s text, we need to recall his

2. Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (Paris: Minit, 1983), 24–25. I translate “phrase” as “sentence,” not “phrase.” In the English translation of this work, Georges Van den Abbeele uses “phrase” for reasons I find unconvincing. (See *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988], 194.) Even though Lyotard’s use of the term is sometimes eccentric, “phrase” does not capture the eccentricity any better than “sentence.” Moreover, as Bennington points out, “sentence” shows the relationship of the text to the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition (*Lyotard*, 123–24). I will abbreviate references to Lyotard’s works as follows: *L’Enthousiasme: La critique kantienne de l’histoire* (Paris: Galilée, 1986) as *E*; *Le Différend* (Paris: Minit, 1983) as *D*; *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Bennington and Massumi, as *PMC*; “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?” in *PMC* as *WPM*; “Interview,” *Diacritics* 14 (1984): 16–23, as *I*; *Au juste* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1979) as *AJ*; “Judiciousness in Dispute, or Kant after Marx,” in *The Aims of Representation: Subject/Text/History*, ed. Murray Krieger (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), as *KM*; “Histoire universelle et différences culturelles,” *Critique* 456 (1985): 559–68, as *HU*. The term *différend* means “dispute, difference, disagreement.”

argument with Jürgen Habermas about the “unity of culture” because Habermas still lies in the background of his new book. In “Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?” Lyotard characterizes Habermas’s project: “What Habermas requires from the arts and the experiences they provide is, in short, to bridge the gap between cognitive, ethical, and political discourses, thus opening the way to a unity of experience” (WPM, 72). Habermas presents an updated version of his position in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*: “Insofar as speakers and hearers straightforwardly achieve mutual understanding about something in the world, they move within the horizon of their common life-world; this remains in the background of the participants—as an intuitively known, unproblematic, and unanalyzable, holistic background.”³ Unity is not in the subject but in the background, which can be studied by the reconstructive sciences so that “the pre-theoretical grasp of rules on the part of competently speaking, acting, and knowing subjects” (*PDM*, 298) can be made explicit. This problematic uses the notion of “successful communication” as a justification for bringing in an all-embracing idea of a shared system of practices that puts the critical dynamics of language out of play. Habermas does this by distinguishing between the problem-solving function of language, which is engaged with “the structural constraints and communicative functions of everyday life,” and “the poetic world-disclosing function of language” (*PDM*, 204), whose role is simply to “enrich” the everyday world (*PDM*, 207). Lyotard associates this project with Hegel and “the notion of a dialectically totalizing experience” (WPM, 73). For Hegel and Habermas, one kind of sentence is granted dominance over the others—the speculative sentence. The stakes of this *différend* are not simply error but terror. “We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. Under the general demand for slackening and for appeasement, we can hear the mutterings of the desire for a return of terror” (WPM, 81–82).

3. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 298. I shall abbreviate it here as *PDM*.

In *Le Différend*, Lyotard suggests his reasons for his return-to-the-texts philosophy in a section called “context.” In addition to familiar notions such as “the linguistic turn” and the absence of metanarratives, he cites “the laziness with regard to ‘theory’ and the lack of rigor that accompanies it—new this, new that, post-this, post-that. It is time to philosophize” (*D*, 11). Indeed, Lyotard wants to “defend and illustrate philosophy in its *différend* with its two adversaries: from the outside, the economic genre of discourse . . . ; from the inside, the academic genre of discourse” (*D*, 11). The study is divided into numbered paragraphs—like Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, a text that continues to inform Lyotard’s work—into which are inserted readings of various philosophers: Plato, Hegel, Lévinas, and especially Kant. These readings, which are interpreted in terms of Lyotard’s philosophy of the sentence, do not carry out a hermeneutic dialogue with the other text, nor do they work out the rhetorical potential of the text à la Derrida; rather, they emerge in the present in response to a request: “one writes because one hears a request [*demande*] and an order to answer it; I read Kant or Adorno or Aristotle not in order to detect the request they themselves tried to answer by writing but in order to hear what they are requesting from me while I write or so that I may write” (I, 19). The notion of *demande* comes from Lévinas, and it is woven throughout *Le Différend*.

In Lévinas’s discussion of obligation, the Other cannot be constituted as Other, even though the self is tempted to do so. “The violence of the revelation [of otherness] is the expulsion of the self out of the instance of speaker. . . .” The universe of the ethical sentence is “an I stripped of the illusion of being a speaker of sentences and gripped incomprehensibly by the instance of receiver” (*D*, 164). The self as speaker can issue a subsequent sentence that tries to master the ethical sentence but that can never deny the event or “forget the transcendence of the other” (*D*, 164). In such a move “the passage between the ethical sentence and the cognitive sentence can be made only by forgetting the first of these” (*D*, 165). The cogito and Husserl’s constitution of intersubjectivity are displaced by the request (*demande*).

These ethical or prescriptive sentences are not to be confused with normative sentences: “The norm makes a law of the prescription. ‘You must perform such an action,’ says the prescrip-

tion. The normative sentence adds: 'It's a norm decreed by X or Y'" (*D*, 206). Obligation is thus independent of any normative legitimation. The aporias that all attempts to legitimate authority are drawn into—vicious circle ("I have authority over you because you authorize me to have it"), infinite regression ("x is authorized by y who is authorized by z, etc.")—illustrate the normative sentence's incommensurability with other sentences (*D*, 206). Moving from prescriptive sentences to normative sentences marks the shift from ethics to politics for Lyotard because norms require "communities of listeners for prescriptive statements" (*D*, 207).

For example, authorization in a republic is formulated this way: "We decree [*édictons*] as a norm that we are obliged to perform action x." The roles of speaker and receiver are commutable in this formulation; however, this statement includes two different sentence types—normative and prescriptive. The "we" of the normative is a speaker; the "we" of the prescriptive is a receiver. Thus, there is always skepticism about the identity of "we." Another difference between the two types is that normative sentences are like performatives. In order to have a norm, all that has to be done is to formulate it. Prescriptives, on the other hand, require a succeeding sentence that tells whether the sentence was obeyed or not. This liberty of obligation (*D*, 147–48) marks the division between ethics and politics.

Politics involves a notion of community, which Lyotard articulates with a Kantian vocabulary that distinguishes between concepts and Ideas. "Community"—like all totalities—is an Idea for which there is no ostensible referent or, in Kant's terms, no intuitions, as there are for concepts. Speculative and dialectical sentences present *analogia*: "the dialectical sentence acts as if it referred to phenomena" (*D*, 191). Hence, there is no ethical community that can be formed from such an Idea (*D*, 188). Plato and Marx violate the incommensurability between cognitive and ethical sentences, for they have "the conviction that there is a true being of society and that society will be just when it conforms to this true being. One can thus draw just prescriptions from true descriptions" (*AJ*, 48). Hence, "revolutionary politics rests on a transcendental illusion in the political domain; it confuses what is presentable as an object for a cognitive sentence with what is presentable as an object for a speculative and/or ethical sen-

tence—that is, schemas or examples with *analogia*” (D, 233). Thus, notions of community, whether they participate in *petits récits* or *grands récits*, are Kantian Ideas. Lyotard does not denounce such sentences but articulates their relationship to other sentences.

Marx, for example, mistakenly performs two moves. The first is that he goes from the “sign of enthusiasm” (in Kant’s sense⁴) to the ideal of a “revolutionary subject, the proletariat”; in the second, he goes “from this ideal to the real political organization of the real working class” (D, 247–48). The party confuses an ideal object, the proletariat, “with real working classes, the multiple referents of cognitive sentences” (D, 248). The party masks this *différend* by monopolizing the procedures that establish historical reality; however, “the repressed *différend* returns inside the workers’ movement” (D, 248). At the same time, Lyotard affirms and rewrites Marx’s critique of capitalism. Before the capitalist tribunal, the worker is forced to use “the language of capital”—i.e., he can complain in terms of his wage-earning but cannot put into question the very category of wage-earner (KM, 61).

This discussion of community raises several questions. If a notion of community is a necessary presupposition of the sentence that permits disagreements to emerge, this does not mean, as David Ingram concludes in his fine essay, that “the reflective judgment encompasses and even incorporates the differential structure of language encapsulated in the notion of *différend*.”⁵ By making community an Idea and not a concept, Lyotard exposes the *différend* in arguments that use presupposition to reinstate logocentrism. Lyotard, like Derrida in a different way, explodes the argument that uses a notion of shared assumptions to assert a common ground and to reduce the logic of difference to the ontology of the same.⁶ If my utterance presupposes a community, the sentence in which I do so does not commit me to the same ontology as my interlocutor. The spatial metaphor “of common ground” that underwrites “sharing” collapses because hetero-

4. I discuss the importance of Kant’s notion of signs later in the essay.

5. Ingram, “Postmodern Kantianism.”

6. Donald Davidson’s “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme,” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), is perhaps the best-known argument. Davidson maintains that the idea of various

geneity is not simply between but within communities. Ontological *différends* emerge not just between radically different cultures—the usual field for speculation in Quine and Davidson—but in living rooms, where referential dramas displace the known and the unknown.⁷ Lyotard reminds us that “being is not being but ‘there is’” (*D*, 200), that the fissures in the language of being open within sentences. He does not propose “a neo-liberal pluralism” or Richard Rorty’s “contextual pragmatism,” as Seyla Benhabib claims.⁸ This liberal hermeneutics presumes a “free” dialogue that ignores ontological and social positions. Unlike Rorty’s notion of conversation, where the dialogical possibilities are divided into those who are within a community and those who are outside it, Lyotard’s theory of the sentence discloses the heterogeneities not only within communities but in the ways the concept of community is phrased. His work thus has a potential for ideology critique that Rorty’s does not.⁹

Lyotard dismisses Gadamerian hermeneutics with the cavalier

conceptual schemes which organize the world differently is unintelligible since no language that is radically different from our own would be translatable. As Hilary Putnam says in his update of Davidson’s argument, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 119: “However different our images of knowledge and conceptions of rationality, we share a huge fund of assumptions and beliefs about what is reasonable with even the most bizarre culture we can succeed in interpreting at all.” Lyotard (and I) would also reject the scheme/world distinction and accept the necessity of some shared concepts; however, I would not accept the conclusion that sharing some concepts is sufficient to mediate any “significant” incommensurability.

7. See chapter 6 of my *Realism and the Drama of Reference* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988) for an analysis of how such differences emerge.

8. Benhabib, “Epistemologies of Postmodernism,” 123, 124.

9. In “Solidarity or Objectivity,” in *Post-Analytic Philosophy*, ed. John Rajchman and Cornel West (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 13, Rorty says, “To be ethnocentric is to divide the human race into the people to whom one must justify one’s beliefs and the others.” In “Contingency of Language,” in *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), Rorty uses Donald Davidson to develop a theory of linguistic holism that feeds into an ethical holism. Such a view clearly opposes Lyotard’s theory of the sentence. See the interesting exchange between Rorty and Lyotard in *Critique* 456 (May 1985), where Lyotard says in response to Rorty’s paper: “There is a *différend* between Richard Rorty and me. . . . My genre of discourse is tragic. His is conversational” (581).

comment that it “guarantees that there is a meaning to know and thus confers legitimacy on history” (*PMC*, 35). That is, Lyotard, like Habermas, rejects Gadamer’s presupposition that agreement subverts disagreement: “Is it not, in fact, the case that every misunderstanding presupposes a ‘deep common accord’?” “No assertion is possible that cannot be understood as an answer to a question, and assertions can only be understood in this way.”¹⁰ For Lyotard and Habermas the effects of ideology rupture the dialogical situation. For Habermas, every speech act has three dimensions, cognitive, interactive, and expressive/aesthetic, though any particular act usually foregrounds one. Each of these functions makes a distinct validity claim—truth, rightness, and truthfulness, respectively. In the ideal speech situation, where differences of power are removed, these claims can be adjudicated. The entire problematic is built on the premise that communicative action—“action oriented toward reaching an understanding”—is the fundamental goal of action and is in fact “already embodied in the existing of forms of interaction.”¹¹ For Habermas, these claims can be discussed in a language of argument that permits “content” to move easily among different sentences since they all share the same “life-world.” Lyotard, on the other hand, puts the conflict in language itself, not between competing claims by people who share a language. The tensions among the various sentential practices of a culture cannot be automatically mediated. Lyotard is committed to a critical pragmatics, informed by the values of justice and freedom, that discloses the linkages of sentences, linkages that are made with Kantian rather than Hegelian Ideas. Lyotard does not rule out mediation—indeed his notion of linkage shows how ubiquitous mediating Ideas are in discourse—rather, he exposes the cost of mediation.

At this point, we need to clarify the relationship between sentences and narratives. In Lyotard’s taxonomy, narrative is part of the category called genres of discourse, a higher level of ab-

10. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 7, 11.

11. Habermas, “Universal Pragmatics,” in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 1, and “Reply to My Critics,” in *Habermas: Critical Debates*, ed. David Held and John Thompson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 227.

straction than the sentence. Genres resituate *différends* from the level of the sentence to the question of ends (*D*, 52). These genres orient sentences of various types toward a finality by providing rules for their linkage. Linkage is both necessary and contingent. For example, "The door is closed" can be followed by (1) "Yes, of course. What do you think doors are for?" (2) "I know. They're trying to lock me up." (3) "Good, I want to talk to you" (*D*, 123). One must link one sentence to another, and yet there are no necessary connections between any two sentences; however, we should not confuse his work with that of others who emphasize language. "Politics consists in the fact that language [*le langage*] is not language [*le langage*] but sentences" (*D*, 200). Lyotard opens a space for critique that shows the obfuscatory powers of narratives: "the multitude of types of sentences and genres of discourse find a way to . . . neutralize the differends in narratives" (*D*, 228). He thus corrects a confusion created by *The Postmodern Condition* that the absence of metanarratives of legitimation collapsed a space for critique so that first-order *petits récits* were the irreducible category, the guarantor of heterogeneity against totalizing metanarratives.¹²

However, if the sentence is the irreducible category, what is the site of critique where critical philosophy marks out pure sentence families and prescribes that we respect the integrity of each type? In his afterword to the English translation of *Au juste*, Samuel Weber formulates two parts of this objection. First, "does not the concept of absolute, intact singularity remain tributary to the same logic of identity that sustains any and all ideas of totality?"¹³

12. See Christopher Norris, *The Contest of Faculties* (New York: Methuen, 1984). The confusion results from his discussion of the Cashinua. My reading is that the narrative knowledge of this culture is the other not only of those who want to legitimize it but of his own discursive analysis as well. See Benhabib's lucid comments ("Epistemologies of Postmodernism," 118–20). Lyotard criticizes his earlier discussion of narrative in *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), 45: "It is not right to give the narrative genre an absolute privilege over other genres of discourse in the analysis of human or in particular 'language' (ideological) phenomena, and even less in a philosophical approach. Certain of my previous reflections perhaps succumbed to this 'transcendental spectre' ('Présentations,' *Instructions païennes*, even *La Condition postmoderne*)."

13. Samuel Weber, Afterword to Lyotard, *Just Gaming*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 103.

Secondly, “by prescribing that no game, especially not that of prescription, should dominate the others, one is doing what it is simultaneously claimed is being avoided: one is dominating the other games in order to protect them from domination” (105). Weber raises what could be called the Derridean objection. In *Positions*, for example, Derrida says, “Spacing is the impossibility for an identity to be closed on itself, on the inside of its proper interiority, or in its coincidence with itself.”¹⁴ Is Lyotard offering a familiar Wittgensteinian approach that tries to ignore or refute deconstruction? I don’t think so. What he is doing is offering a double writing at the level of the sentence rather than one at the level of the word. Instead of working the borders of the concept like Derrida, Lyotard intervenes in a different way and with a different style. We can see this through his reading of Kant, first with regard to the faculty of judgment and then with regard to the autonomy of the other faculties (*régimes de phrases*).

Lyotard finds in Kant’s faculty of judgment a means of “passage” among different language games. “Each of the genres of discourse is like an island; the faculty of judgment, at least in part, is like a ship-owner or an admiral who sends expeditions from one island to another, expeditions that are intended to present to one what they have found . . . in the other and that could serve for a first as an ‘as if intuition’ in order to validate it” (*D*, 190). The *als ob, comme si*, “as if” neither accentuates nor obliterates the gap between sentences; rather, the phrase “takes the gap into consideration; it is an *Übergang* that is the model for all *Übergänge*” (*D*, 181). “The ‘as if’ comes not from the transcendental imagination for the invention of the comparison but from the faculty of judgment for its regulation” (*D*, 181). There is no totalization of faculties. If analogies are part of a faculty (family of sentences), then the faculty is always open, undetermined. The critic or judge “who examines the validity of the claims [*prétentions*] of various families of sentences . . . judges without a rule of judgment” (*E*, 11). Thus, critical philosophy “does not come from a faculty but from a quasi-faculty or ‘as if’ faculty (the faculty of judgment,

14. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 94. See Derrida’s “Parergon,” in *La Vérité en peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1978), where he discusses Kant’s attempt to frame aesthetics.

sentiment) in as much as its rule of determination of pertinent universes is indeterminate" (*E*, 12). Lyotard insists that we do not mistake his "passages" for "bridges," for such a reading would put us right back with Habermas. There are no rules for crossing from one domain to another, but it is through these passages that "one sentence family finds in another the basis for presenting the case that would validate it in the form of the sign, the example, the symbol, the type, the monogram . . ." (*E*, 111). Moreover, the notion of the "sea" in this metaphor is linkage, linkage that is at once necessary and contingent. The sea figures the space of indeterminate passage, not a community that embraces these various sentence families.

Lyotard does occasionally move outside the Kantian vocabulary and thematize his own writing, which falls into the genre of philosophical discourse: "The rule for philosophical discourse is to discover its rule. Its a priori is its stake [*enjeu*]" (*D*, 95). This genre is not all-encompassing: "the examination of sentences is a genre that cannot take the place of politics. . . . The philosophical genre, which has the appearance of a metalanguage, remains in this genre only if it knows that there is no metalanguage. Thus, it remains popular and humorous" (*D*, 227).¹⁵ Lyotard insists on the positionality of all discourse—that is, the positions within the pragmatic scheme of the sentence (sender, receiver, referent, etc.) and the position of a given sentence-type within larger structures of discourse.

What emerges from Lyotard's dislodging of the cognitive sentence is the dynamic energy of the request that ruptures mapping and calls for new idioms. We can see this in his reading of Kant's discussion of the French Revolution. For Kant, the enthusiasm of the spectators of the Revolution is a "sign of progress." Following Kant, Lyotard maintains that political judgments, like aesthetic ones, do not present determinate objects of knowledge. The revolution is a "sign" because the spectators, as opposed to the participants, witness the event as they would undergo the experience of the sublime. However, if in Kant we can make the

15. Several pages before this Lyotard says that "the law must always be respected with humor because it cannot be completely respected without making it the mode of linkage of heterogeneities" (*D*, 208).

easy accusation of an aestheticism, in Lyotard's reading we cannot. Lyotard wants "to break the monopoly granted to the cognitive regime of sentences about history and risk lending an ear to what is not presentable under the rules of knowledge. Any reality includes this demand [*exigence*] in as much as it includes unknown possible meanings" (*D*, 92). Thus, the spectator's enthusiasm "is an aesthetic analogue of a pure republican fervor" (*D*, 241). Lyotard is not suggesting we replace engagement with spectatorship, referential statements with aesthetic ones; rather, he makes a double marking, in which he defines the integrity of each sentence and makes a demand on the receiver to generate passages to other domains. In Kant's terms, the spectator's "enthusiasm," which is "a modality of sublime feeling," asks the imagination to furnish a direct, sensual presentation of an Idea of reason . . . but it does not succeed and thus experiences its impotence" (*D*, 238).¹⁶

However, the appeal of the sign and the problematic of positionality do not answer the arguments against the whole Kantian dimension of the project—e.g., the historical status of the categories. Lyotard explicitly distances himself from Kant's anthropology and his notion of reason: "We feel today, and that is part of the *Begebenheit* of our time, that the fission that is unleashed in this [*Begebenheit*] reaches this [i.e., Kant's] subject and this reason" (*E*, 113). Nonetheless, Lyotard can hardly be said either to defend his taxonomy as a project or the definitions within each category. His work leaves problems in three areas: reference, subjectivity, and the status of his reading of Kant.

His narrow definition of cognitive sentences—which is Kantian—and his discussion of reference—which is woven from Kripke and others in the analytic tradition—ignore not only the deconstruction of reference from Heidegger to Derrida and de

16. In Derrida's work, we see a similar emphasis on the energetic as well as the semantic dimensions of textuality, particularly in his discussion of certain key terms, such as *différance*, *dissémination*, spacing, and the unreadable: "[S]pacing is a concept which also, but not exclusively, carries the meaning of a productive, positive, generative force; like *dissémination*, like *différance*, it carries along with it a genetic motif. . . ." (*Positions*, 106). "The unreadable is not the opposite of the readable but rather the ridge [arete] that gives it momentum, movement, sets it in motion" ("Living On/Border Lines," trans. James Hulbert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism* [New York: Seabury Press, 1979], 116).

Man but also Rorty's sustained attack on the analytic tradition in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.¹⁷ Lyotard defines the problem of reference as follows: "The question of the reality of the referent is . . . always resolved by the play, the free play of three phrases: one carrying the meaning, one carrying the name and the third carrying what Kant calls the presentation" (KM, 55). Although the issue of reference is beyond the scope of this essay; we can see how Lyotard resolves too easily such problems as the inside and the outside of language and the concept and its other. He gives no place to critical genealogies of vocabularies and their relationship to the text. One needs to recall Derrida's remarks on reference and textuality here: "What is produced in the current trembling is a reevaluation of the relationship between the general text and what was believed to be, in the form of reality (history, politics, economics, sexuality, etc.), the simply referable exterior of language or writing. . . ." ¹⁸ If Lyotard would remind Derrida that his writing does not escape the contingency of linking sentences, Derrida would remind Lyotard that we need to reverse and reinscribe the vocabularies of Kant and Wittgenstein and that the space of critique is the general text and not simply the refiguration of the sentence. If, for example, Lyotard discloses the *différend* that emerges in sentences containing "proletariat," his work ignores the rhetorical deconstruction of Marx's concepts that we find, for example, in Derrida's complex reading of value through the exchange of linguistics and economics in "The White Mythology."¹⁹

Another difficulty comes from Lyotard's failure to lay out the

17. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

18. Derrida, *Positions*, 91. Benhabib points out with regard to *PMC* that "the privileging of developments of mathematical and natural science is problematical and does not break with the tradition of modern sciences which simply ignores the knowledge claims and problems of the human and social sciences" (117). In his subsequent works, Lyotard's recurrent use of Kantian vocabulary continues this effect.

19. This essay appears in Derrida, *The Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). See Gregory S. Jay's fascinating reading of this piece and his general discussion of the textuality of value in "Values and Deconstructions: Derrida, Saussure, Marx," in *Cultural Critique*, no. 8 (Winter 1987–88): 153–96.

stakes of his reading of Kant. Borrowing a distinction from Rorty, one can say that Lyotard does not distinguish a “rational reconstruction” of Kant—which reads a philosopher’s work in light of modern problems and shows “that the answers he gave to these questions, though plausible and exciting, need restatement or purification”—and the metaphilosophical reading of *Geistesgeschichte*, which “works at the level of problematics rather than problems.”²⁰ In his rational reconstruction, Lyotard valorizes Kant’s theory of heterogeneity that we find in the distinctions between concepts and Ideas, determinate and indeterminate judgments; however, Lyotard fails to do the metaphilosophical work—that is, articulating further his problematic with regard to those of other philosophers and the relevance of the Kantian problematic—necessary to give his appropriation of Kant’s distinctions any bite in contemporary philosophical vocabulary. For example, if cognitive and ethical judgments are considered to be cultural practices, is the distinction between them so clear-cut? Is there interaction between them? By merely maintaining that ethical and aesthetic judgments are indeterminate, he avoids addressing the question of what informs such judgments. Moreover, by reading Kant against Hegel in order to keep the ethical independent of the dialectic, Lyotard continues to give cognitive sentences center stage and thus reinstates as much as he subverts the tradition. That is, he continues to separate epistemology and ontology from ethical or aesthetic value.

This brings us to a paradoxical moment in Lyotard’s text: on the one hand, we find the dynamic energy invoked by his notions of the “request,” the “passage,” and the call to judgment; on the other, we find the refusal to open a space for subjectivity. The subject is simply a discursive position: “Our ‘intentions’ are tensions to link a certain way that genres of discourse exercise on the senders, receivers, referents, and meanings” (*D*, 197). He often calls up the straw man of the unified individual as agent. Thus, in the beginning of *Le Différend* he declares that one of his objectives is “to refute the reader’s prejudice, anchored in him by centuries

20. See Rorty’s “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres,” in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 57.

of humanism and 'human sciences,' that there is 'man,' that there is 'language,' and that man uses language for his ends" (*D*, 11). Paradoxically, however, he empties the subject by employing an almost-Sartrean notion of nothingness to describe the ontological space between sentences. The "question 'how to link?'" proceeds from the gap [*néant*] that 'separates' this sentence from the one that follows. There are *différends* because or just as there is *Ereignis*" (*D*, 200). The recognition of this truth about the relationship among sentences is opposed to the mystifying powers of genres of discourse. "Genres of discourse are modes of forgetting the gap or the event; they fill the emptiness between sentences" (*D*, 200). As in Sartre's theory of radical choice where the *être-pour-soi* contemplates the practices from which he is severed, Lyotard's meta-subject of philosophical discourse has access to the ontological gap that opens a space for the ethical and for the disclosure of ideology; however, there is no acting subject to respond to these appeals. Charles Taylor in his analysis of Sartre's theory of choice shows how such conception of agency is "another avatar of the disembodied ego, the subject who can objectify all being, including his own, and choose in radical freedom."²¹ The disembodied philosophical subject of Lyotard's text locks the "empirical" subject into an inflexible pragmatic position. Movement to another discursive position is not simply contingent and indeterminate. Such a movement also smacks of the "inauthentic" simply because it can be mapped. The only values Lyotard endorses are those that escape mapping—justice, which addresses *différends*, and the quest for the sublime or the unrepresentable. Even though Lyotard provides no space in his pragmatics for the agency that his text urges, we can revise his pragmatics to provide a theory of agency that avoids the humanism. Before developing this theory, we need to look at the most famous and troubling of his calls to agency, his Kantian appeal to "present the unrepresentable," which appears in almost all of his recent work.

In *Le Différend*, he says, "Our destination . . . is to have to furnish a presentation for the unrepresentable and thus, when Ideas are at issue, to exceed everything that can be presented" (*D*,

21. Charles Taylor, "What Is Human Agency?" in *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 35.

238–39). This formula has drawn the charge of “pluralism for its own sake.” Lyotard’s defense against such an accusation involves not only the deconstruction of the accepted notion of pluralism that we have seen but the power of what he calls alternately *le genre économique* and *le tribunal du capitalisme* to nullify *différends*. I give several formulations to illustrate Lyotard’s language of agency: “The only insurmountable obstacle that the hegemony of the economic genre encounters is the heterogeneity of *régimes* of sentences and of genres of discourse. . . . The obstacle does not depend on human will but the *différend*” (D, 260). “Capital grants hegemony to the economic genre” (D, 205). “The tribunal of capitalism makes the *différends* between *régimes* of sentences or genres of discourse insignificant” (D, 255). “Capital is that which wants a single language and a single network, and it never stops trying to present them” (KM, 64). The power of economic discourse is clearly not a discursive property—as the power of, for example, the Christian narrative to absorb events (D, 229–30)—but alludes to the social force of this genre, a force that is made more explicit in the second sentence with the phrase *le tribunal du capitalisme*. In the last formulation “capital”—a Kantian Idea—has agency, desire, and power over language and the subjects bound up with it. Even if we leave aside this dubious characterization of capitalism,²² we could still ask why Lyotard remains within the horizon of the *différend*, which talks about power only in terms of sentences, and does not thematize what is omitted by his approach. For example, in pragmatic terms all that needs to be done to have a norm is to formulate it; however, this leaves out social and economic practices that are also at work. To articulate the positionality of the subject requires a richer vocabulary than the one provided by pragmatics. As Benhabib points out, “the difficulty of political liberalism, old and new, is the neglect of the *structural* sources of inequality, influence, resource and power

22. In “Capitalist Culture and the Circulatory System” (in *The Aims of Representation*), Stephen Greenblatt discusses Jameson’s and Lyotard’s reduction of the complexities of capitalism. If for Lyotard, capitalism reduces *différends*, for Jameson, it is “the perpetuator of separate discursive domains, the agent of privacy, psychology, and the individual.” Hence, for both critics, “history functions as a convenient anecdotal ornament upon a theoretical structure, and capitalism appears not as a complex social and economic development in the West but as a malign philosophical principle” (262).

among competing groups.”²³ Moreover, Lyotard offers no account of change in language games. How do linkages change over time? What is the relationship of discursive to prediscursive practices?

A philosophy of the sentence can be compatible with a post-modern view of agency; however, we need to revise Lyotard's pragmatics and add a two-tiered notion of practice drawn from Alasdair MacIntyre and the late work of Foucault. MacIntyre defines practice as “any coherent and complex form of socially established and cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.”²⁴ He goes on to cite examples such as painting and football but excludes mere skills. A practice is not simply an activity that the subject chooses to take up but a system that constitutes a moment of subjectivity. This notion of practice—which I limit to language here—enriches Lyotard's ideas of sentence types and genres of discourse while remaining consistent with them. For example, when Lambert Strether arrives in Paris in James's *The Ambassadors*, he discovers that his current aesthetic practice—ways of making aesthetic statements—cannot accommodate the statements that the Parisians make to him. When he revises these practices, he does not just gain a skill or acquire knowledge; he transforms what he is.²⁵

23. Benhabib, “Epistemologies of Postmodernism,” 124.

24. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 187. There is much in MacIntyre's controversial work that I do not accept—for example, his narrative of the “fall” from a unified tradition and his redemptive use of narrative itself; however, the concept of practice can be extracted without subscribing to these other notions. As Richard Bernstein, in *Philosophical Profiles* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 126, says of the discussion of practices, “MacIntyre and Nietzsche [whom MacIntyre sets up as an unacceptable relativist] look like close companions. For Nietzsche himself portrays for us a variety of practices, their internal goods, and what is required to excel in these practices.”

25. I develop a reading of *The Ambassadors* employing this problematic in “Value and Subjectivity: The Dynamics of the Sentence in James's *The Ambassadors*,” *Comparative Literature* (forthcoming).

If this concept of practice covers activities thematized by a society (the hermeneutic dimension), we also need to have a sense that goes “behind the back” of the subject and of the humanist histories of the agents—e.g., Strether’s and James’s accounts in the above example. That is, we need Foucault’s genealogical sense of practice as a deep disciplinary structure that reveals the discursive webs that work through and between the publicly thematized practices. Foucault’s most promising suggestions come in remarks about ethics as *rapport à soi* (the self’s relationship to itself) as an aesthetics of existence in which subjectivity and value are no longer reduced to power as they are in the early and middle Foucault.²⁶ Truth, for example, is not just an issue of reference but a particular constitution of the subject. “In European culture up to the sixteenth century, the problem remains: ‘what is the work which I must effect upon myself so as to be capable and worthy of acceding to the truth?’ After Descartes, ‘it suffices that I be *any* subject which can see what is evident.’ Evidence is substituted for ascesis at the point where the relationship to the self intersects the relationship to others and the world.”²⁷ Thus, we can read a text through the intersubjectively thematized practices as well as from a space that permits alternative articulations of these practices. Such a move would enrich Lyotard’s notion of the subject since it would not be simply a contingent series of discursive positions but a site informed by various value-practices. The genealogies of these practices are in dynamic interaction. Thus, aesthetic and ethical values are not opposed in a static map that merely asserts that certain sentence types are heterogeneous; rather, values can be modified and reworked. Value is not simply a negative freedom from existing structures but a freedom to pursue a linguistically disclosed possibility. This notion of value/practice avoids totalizing conceptions such as “background” or “life-world” that throw the blanket of “meaning” over heterogeneous constructions, and brings value into Lyotard’s typology of sentences. In addition, this problematic

26. See Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Post-Structuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (London: Verso, 1987), for a devastating critique of Foucault’s theory of the subject prior to his later work.

27. “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 371.

would help address values other than justice and freedom as well as move outside the narrow opposition between obligation and norm that informs Lyotard's discussion of ethics and politics.²⁸

What makes Foucault's and Lyotard's work compatible, however, is also what makes it controversial: their commitment to a critical freedom that offers no ends. In "What Is Enlightenment?" a discussion of Kant's famous essay of the same title, Foucault reopens Kant's notion of critique for the present: "The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression." Through archaeological and genealogical investigation we "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do or think. . . . [This kind of critique] is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom."²⁹ This "undefined work of freedom" lends itself to a reactionary charge because it proposes no revolutionary utopia or political ideal. In his defense of Foucault, John Rajchman argues that postrevolutionary critique does not exclude the possibility of revolt: "[F]reedom does not . . . lie in discovering or being able to determine who we are, but in rebelling against those ways in which we are already defined, categorized, and classified. . . . Our real freedom is found in dissolving or changing the politics that embody our nature, and as such it is asocial and anarchical. No society or polity could be based on it."³⁰

However, Rajchman's formulation does not answer Nancy Fraser's questions about Foucault's project: "Why is struggle preferable to submission? Why ought domination to be resisted? Only with the introduction of normative notions could he [Foucault] begin to tell us what is wrong with the modern power/knowledge regime and why we ought to oppose it."³¹ A similar charge could be

28. See Arnold Davidson's fine discussion of Foucault's enrichment of the traditional field of ethics, "Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Hoy (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

29. "What Is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, 45.

30. John Rajchman, *Michel Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 62, 123. Barry Smart makes a similar case for Foucault in "The Politics of Truth," in Hoy, *Foucault*.

31. Nancy Fraser, "Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Norma-

made against Lyotard since he also offers no justification or development of the abstract call to present the unrepresentable. The unrepresentable, the beyond, is the counterpart to the *différend*, the suppressed, since they both are defined only negatively against existing discursive structures. He offers no discussion of how competing *différends* are to be adjudicated. Thus, we find statements such as “Politics cannot have for its stake the good but must have the least bad” (*D*, 203). The “bad” is defined as the “interdiction of possible sentences at every moment” (*D*, 204). These citations raise numerous questions about *différends* and value for which Lyotard has no satisfactory response. Are all *différends* equivalent? Does minimizing the bad mean simply reducing the number of *différends*? Lyotard, like the early and middle Foucault, identifies the discursive with the oppressive. Even though these problems are serious, I do not think that they undermine the project so much as limit its horizon. The analysis of *différends* can be an important critical moment in normative political projects. Moreover, by keeping their critiques free of normative baggage, Lyotard and Foucault maximize the capacity to intervene in complex local discourses. If neither offers us paths to revolt or virtues to practice, both offer analyses that disclose hidden adversaries in the practices of contemporary culture. However, their two approaches are not merely complementary, for the spaces of their critique are not entirely commensurate and homogeneous but heterogeneous. If Foucault would unfold the lines of power that subtend Lyotard’s rather traditional taxonomy of sentences, Lyotard would expose the way Foucault’s language of practices functions in sentences and the *différends* produced by his formulations.

Thus, we can say that Lyotard offers a dynamic critical philosophy of freedom. First, his philosophy of the sentence is strategic rather than foundational or merely critical. His text is an intervention in the current reflection on language and politics; it is not a

tive Confessions,” *Praxis International* 1 (1981): 238. See also her “Michel Foucault: A Young Conservative?” in *Ethics* 96 (1985): 165–84. Lyotard could respond to Fraser, “Whatever the claims or forms of normative legitimation (myth, revelation, deliberation), a genre takes hold of heterogeneous sentences and subordinates them to the same stake” (*D*, 208).

theory. Secondly, Lyotard's taxonomy is not a static set of categorical identities—that is, Weber's objection—but a dynamic call to theorize and to face the impossibility of theoretical totality. Thus, Lyotard not only maps but spaces the refiguration of the map. Politics and literature—which do not fit one of his generic categories—have as their stakes the discovery of their stakes. “When Cezanne takes his brush, the stakes of painting is questioned; when Schoenberg sits at the piano, the stake of music; when Joyce grabs his pen, that of literature” (*D*, 201). Art and politics are undetermined discourses that bring together heterogeneous sentences and challenge the singular autonomy of the sentence types. The rules for these “quasi” genres do not preexist. The power of the text or the painting is not what it says or what it is, but what it asks of the receiver: “Painting will be good (will have achieved its end, will have approached it) if it demands [*oblige*] the receiver to ask himself what it is” (*D*, 201). Thus, “the stakes of a certain literature, philosophy, and perhaps politics are to bear witness [*témoigner*] to differends by finding them idioms” (*D*, 30).

Hence, Lyotard's recent work employs categories not in order to proscribe but to disclose what is suppressed by following rules and by not following them. *Le Différend* develops the sketch announced in the last line of *The Postmodern Condition*, which demands “a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown” (67). The quest for the unknown thus does not deny the desire for justice but contributes to the uncovering of silenced *différends*, the sentential means of oppression. This is not to say that there are not other means of oppression or other means of searching for injustice. Lyotard's affirmation of “heterogeneity” is not a shallow, irresponsible aesthetic claim, in which the “paralogical” method of science joins that of the arts. The notion of *différend* situates the two desires that inform Lyotard's politics in social/textual conflict; however, the *différend* is not a mark on the map of social discourse but an exiled, uncharted space that not only challenges the procedures of referential sentences but makes demands on us. “In the *différend*, something cries out in respect to a name. Something demands to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of this impossibility” (KM, 65). The philosophy of the *différend* does not naively main-

tain the value of heterogeneity in the face of a political and economic system that thrives on apparent diversity but offers an analysis of the pragmatics that makes such absorption possible. Lyotard's philosophy of the sentence opens a new critical space not simply for articulating politics but for politicizing articulation.