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## Introduction

*After Lyotard*

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MARGRET GREBOWICZ

“Marie puts on her makeup. When it comes to gaining time, we women are always on the losing end. There’s always a head and a body to replaster. Men, all they need to shine is just a little dusting. Not fair. I’m happy with my talk. They won’t understand a thing.”

—Lyotard, “Marie Goes to Japan”<sup>1</sup>

JEAN-FRANÇOIS LYOTARD’S relationship to the question concerning gender can hardly be described as a commitment. Gender, or sexual difference, is very rarely at the center of his writings. Even in the essays which are ostensibly about sexual difference, he never poses (indiscreet) questions like “what is sexual difference?” or “what is the feminine?,” but puts these concepts to work at the peripheries of numerous later essays and in *The Confession of Augustine*. For instance, instead of analyzing something like “sexual difference itself,” Lyotard occasionally composes conversations between two interlocutors who are explicitly female and male.<sup>1</sup> In spite of this apparent coyness, however, Lyotard unapologetically takes gender to be one of the most important philosophical problems of the twentieth century. At the end of “One of the Things at Stake in Women’s Struggles,” he describes theoretical discourse as the century’s male-supremacist scandal, one which will be denounced globally, in the course of a systematic challenging of patriarchy.<sup>2</sup>

From the point of view of the gender theorist, this makes for a fascinating combination: one of France's most revolutionary philosophers of the twentieth century presenting sexual difference as one of the most important problems for philosophy, but doing so in a style that stands apart from the culture of academic feminist inquiry, giving the reader no explicit definitions or analyses, not even a trajectory of questions, but a confusion of images, (im)possibilities, dead ends, splinterings, and desires. After Lyotard, the reader is left scrambling to pose the "right" questions, to make the appropriate linkages.

Lyotard writes repeatedly that it is impossible to philosophize gender or, what for him amounts to the same thing, to philosophize as a woman. In "One of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggles," this is due to the nature of theory—theory itself is phallogocentric and the stakes of philosophy are always already masculine stakes, which necessarily posit the feminine outside its boundaries as matter to be inscribed.<sup>3</sup> In "Can Thought Go On Without a Body?," this is due to the nature of sexual difference, which is itself outside of thought, makes thought possible, and so cannot be thought, properly speaking.<sup>4</sup> In "Return Upon The Return," this is because taking sexual difference as the object of a discourse (as philosophy does, and as Lyotard confesses to have done in "Return Upon the Return") necessarily fails to bear witness to the "uncontrollable anxiety" engendered by sexual difference. "To truly bear witness to it, one must make language anxious," he writes.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the difference of gender "is" not, but intervenes repeatedly, interrupting sometimes theory, sometimes language, sometimes humanity, and at other times appearing as the Big Bang of thought itself.

Sometimes Lyotard even dresses up. Let us not forget Marie, the chain-smoking, middle-aged heroine of his essay "Marie Goes to Japan," whose interior monologue serves as a reminder that we in the academy are putting so much of our energy into work which has little to do with what Lyotard calls "thought." We can imagine her, gazing out the window at the clouds below, on her flight back to Charles De Gaulle, knowing that all that expensive, technical, well-ordered talk of otherness, diversity, difference, hospitality, forgiveness, and so on had been performed by fakes, herself included. As long as ideas are commodities to be exchanged under the law of capitalism, there is no possibility for academic discourse to think difference, to be transformed by it. Marie's colloquium, the global university system, academic publishing . . . none of these things can accommodate thought, which is the very condition of a politics which takes the Other seriously. In the figure of Marie (a woman philosopher, a bit past child-bearing age, her looks fading), Lyotard reminds us that the marketplace of ideas is incommensurable with thought, and that the law of exchange which governs capitalism is airtight in its stupefying stasis. Capitalism is terror because it is the impossibility of the new. "As if it were already done. That's what it is, the world today. Everything that is to be done is as if it were already done."<sup>6</sup>

We hear echoes of this stupefaction in the words of an even older woman, the protagonist of J. M. Coetzee's novel *Age of Iron*, as she describes her experience of watching politicians on television:

And their message stupidly unchanging, stupidly forever the same. Their feat, after years of etymological meditation on the word, to have raised stupidity to a virtue. To stupefy: to deprive of feeling; to numb, deaden; to stun with amazement. Stupor: insensibility, apathy, torpor of mind. Stupid: dulled in the faculties, indifferent, destitute of thought or feeling. From *stupere*, to be stunned, atounded. A gradient from *stupid* to *stunned* to *astounded*, to be turned to stone. The message: that the message never changes. A message that turns people to stone.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, the politics of judgment which Lyotard's work proposes interrupts this stasis "to resist the already done, the already written, the already thought, that's to say precisely commodities, even in the philosophical world or literary field."<sup>8</sup> This interruption is the condition of the possibility of the new. As she attempts to think against the "already done," Marie, the old woman, becomes a figure of the new.

The essays in this collection have this in common: a desire to read the differend of gender as a site for this sort of Lyotardian interruption. Who is the Lyotard who writes as Marie and insists that gender-as-thought must explode philosophy? How can this face of Lyotard contribute to our understanding of his work on theory, politics, pedagogy, and academic economies? And how are (we) academics to begin answering his (her?) directive to "make language anxious"? How are we to think/write gender beyond/after philosophy and "feminist theory"? How are we to write?

"The enormous, extreme, huge importance of the question of gender is precisely that this question has no answer, and that's the only way we can continue to think about it: I try to elaborate, to place femininity and masculinity, but I already know that my answer is a bad one. It's certainly false. It's immediately suspect. And that's good; that's the way we have to approach this question. But this question is enormous; it's a paramount question for somebody who wishes not only to live and to exist but also to think and to write. In a certain sense, you can imagine writing as precisely like how this question of gender is posed and never answered. Maybe that's the best homage we can give to the question of gender—to write."

—Lyotard, interview (1995)<sup>9</sup>

With the notable exceptions of two recent, extensive, book-length studies by feminist theorists, Ewa Ziarek's *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism, and the Politics of Radical Democracy* and Rada Ivekovic's *Le sexe de la*

*philosophie: Jean-François Lyotard et le feminine*, feminist thought in the European tradition has largely ignored Lyotard's work. This omission is particularly interesting in the light of European feminists' ongoing engagement with the work of Foucault, Derrida, and Kristeva, and in light of the well-worn debates concerning the perceived essentialism of French feminist thought. Lyotard should be relevant to these discussions at least because he is the antiessentialist thinker par excellence, whose work has always explicitly engaged with the situation(s) of women.

The reception among feminists in the Anglo-American tradition has been even less warm. In *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Linda Nicholson, Nancy Fraser, and Seyla Benhabib all engage seriously with Lyotard, but are ultimately quite critical of his politics, charging it with a naïve pluralism, an uncritical allegiance to the local versus the global, liberal assumptions, and a dismissal of metanarratives which is too hasty from feminist perspectives.<sup>10</sup> All three arrive at the same conclusion: Lyotard's notion of the political commits us to a vision which does not serve—and is sometimes in direct conflict with—feminist interests. In "Saying Goodbye to Emancipation?," Caroline Ramazanoglu gives an excellent overview of conflicts within feminist work, and repeats the point that there is no real center to "feminist interests."<sup>11</sup> However, she sides with Sabena Lovibond's critical question, "how can anyone ask me to say goodbye to 'emancipatory metanarratives' when my own emancipation is such a patchy, hit-and-miss affair?," and argues that the conflicts within feminism continue to be worked out within "some general narrative that sustains and reproduces dreams of resistance, agency, and emancipation across social divisions."<sup>12</sup> Thus, the argument goes, feminists work within the narrative of emancipation, while Lyotard attempts to leave that narrative behind. The division between feminism and Lyotard is on the level of legitimation, and there, Ramazanoglu concludes, Lyotard has yet to prove to feminists that his ideas are any more useful than the "powerful political tools" provided by the master narratives of emancipation.<sup>13</sup>

Is this description of feminist work accurate and, more importantly, does it offer a satisfying account of the significant differences between Lyotard and feminism at the turn of the century? Feminist thinkers today have trouble articulating the metalevel commitments behind the overtly political, interested slant of their work. The recent work coming out of anglophone, Continental feminism, for instance, is critical of the politics of freedom and agency in which Ramazanoglu situates feminism, and embraces a politics of responsibility instead.<sup>14</sup> In other words, feminists disagree more than ever about how to legitimize their work—and Lyotard's texts provide a critical paradigm in which to think through *this* particular site of dissensus. Here is where Lyotard may be useful to feminist thinkers (and perhaps particularly to the Anglo-American tradition, which seems to wish to appropriate certain philosophies for their use-value): Lyotard proposes a notion of the political

which at its core continuously reexamines questions like: what is politics? What is the relationship between politics and philosophy? What is the relationship between interests/stakes and justice? It will not have been enough to criticize Lyotard for having the wrong politics when the struggle over the nature of the political is itself a site of political contestation.

"After Lyotard" will thus have meant at least two different things. First, we realize that we are writing at a time when conferences include panels with titles which indicate that postmodernism is a thing of the past and that everyone has (or ought to have) moved on to something new. The very idea that we should be able to address or perform a critique of a thing called "postmodernism" indicates that it is finished, closed off, placed under glass, on display, for academic consumption. We are only partly convinced by this obituary, however, and propose another sense of "after Lyotard," an attempt to follow Lyotard, to trace the lines of his thought, not as an act of consumption, but as an involvement, an engagement, a desire to be transformed by the encounter. This is significantly different than the terms in which the Lyotard-feminism debate has been framed until now. We attempt to pose questions which cannot be reduced to "is Lyotard a sufficiently powerful tool for feminism?." This is important: we should attend to what is at stake in an academic discourse which so far has reduced the Lyotard-feminism relationship to questions of use. This instrumentalist frame, like all frames, is hardly innocent. Perhaps even more than other frames, it is fundamentally incommensurable with Lyotard's work and with what he would describe as the thinking/writing for which the problem of gender calls.

As the case of Marie shows, it is no longer obvious who, in the end, is dead and passé: is it the so-called postmodern which has died, as we academics "use" it, think "after" it, "beyond" it, in its "wake" to ever better ideas? Or is it academia, and the institutionalized discipline of critique known as "philosophy," which has long since died, and doesn't know it, as the postmodern continues to condition thought? And what will it have meant to write "after"?

Broadly speaking, we attempt to address two different trajectories along which Lyotard can be read as a thinker of gender: the possible significance of Lyotard's philosophy (not limited to his work on gender) for feminist thought, and the importance of Lyotard's own work on gender for contemporary gender theory. Specific questions addressed in the individual essays include the following: what can feminists learn from the analyses of difference and of the relationship between difference and justice, developed in Lyotard's oeuvre? How does Lyotard contribute to (or intervene in) a feminist understanding of embodiment, of the relationship between the body and technology, and of the importance of embodiment for epistemologists? How does he contribute to (or intervene in) feminist theories informed by psychoanalysis? How are women artists addressed in his aesthetic writings, in his

readings of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics? How can contemporary arts which aim to be gender-literate engage with (or intervene in) his work on fantasy, performance, and the sublime? What is the relationship between the inhuman and the feminine, the infant and the feminine, the unrepresentable and the feminine? What is the role of gender in his analyses of global capitalism, migration, and colonialism, and what can postcolonial theorists learn from this? How do the notions of differend, dissensus, and radical incommensurability, read in feminist contexts, transform the nature and scope of philosophical inquiry and method? What can theorists of gender learn from Lyotard's critique of the theoretical idiom? How is this critique, in turn, transformed by the singular problem which gender poses for thought?

As a whole, this collection serves as a robust meditation on the nature of "the political," as understood by Lyotard. In his afterword, "On Mobled Power," James Williams explores the relationship between gender and the political by reading this relationship through each of the chapters and locating Lyotard's own working-through of this relationship in the early text, *Discours, figure*.

As parts, the volume is divided into thematic sections which correspond to different areas of Lyotard's thought (if it is legitimate to imagine thought as divided into discrete areas). Section 1, "The Human," houses two chapters which address Lyotard's critique of humanism in relationship to the concerns of theorists of gender. Emily Zakin and I focus primarily on the relationship between Lyotard and the work of feminist epistemologists, while Neil Badmington gives an extensive account of the tradition of posthumanist literature and explores the particular role which Lyotard's work on gender plays in this critique of humanism. Section 2, "The Body," offers two different ways of reading Lyotard on the body: Nikki Sullivan reads Lyotard's work on witnessing in relation to cultures of body modification, and Charmaine Coyle reads the figure of the body throughout Lyotard's oeuvre as the site of the political. Section 3, "The Eye-Mind," sets in motion alternative logics of the subject. Kellie Bean explores the performance of gender in the very moment of theatrical performance, using a Harold Pinter play as her case study, while Rachel Jones offers a reading of the work of British artist, Helen Chadwick, as an instance of Lyotard's logic of dissimulation. In Section 4, "The Psyche," two chapters explore Lyotard's long and complicated relationship to psychoanalysis. Dorota Glowacka reads the work of post-Holocaust artist Bracha L. Ettinger as an "after Lyotard" moment, in terms of problems of figure, witnessing, and memory. Theresa Geller shows that Lyotard's work on fantasy and the figure-matrix offers ideas to feminist film theorists which allow a departure from the Lacanian tradition. Section 5, "The Sublime," houses two chapters on Lyotard's work on the sublime. Joanna Zylinska offers a reading of Lyotard in relationship to the tradition of the sublime (Kant, Burke), indicating possibilities for a feminine sublime after Lyotard. Andrew Slade places

Lyotard in relation to Irigaray and takes Marguerite Duras's work as a case study of a possible feminine sublime. The final section, "Dissensus and Division," looks specifically at Lyotard's interest in the irreducibility of difference and explores its relevance to a contemporary, viable politics. I address the discourse of democratization in feminist critiques of science from the perspective of Lyotard's critique of "American" democratic thinking. Rada Ivekovic focuses on Lyotard's notion of the division of reason in the context of his writings on Algeria and considers the extension of these concerns into contemporary feminism(s).

The section headings will be more immediately recognizable to the reader of Lyotard than to the reader of feminist theory. Taken individually, however, the chapters focus on concerns which are central to feminist philosophy in the Continental tradition: embodiment, sexual difference, a "feminine" writing, community, and psychoanalytic theories of the subject. Their approaches to mapping the relationship of Lyotard's work to these concerns vary significantly. He is often placed in agonistic relationships with individual thinkers, some from theory—Immanuel Kant (Zylinska), Luce Irigaray (Slade), Donna Haraway (Grebowicz and Zakin), Jacques Lacan (Geller), Emmanuel Levinas (Sullivan)—and others from literature—Marguerite Duras (Slade) and Harold Pinter (Bean). Two of the chapters trace the relationships between Lyotard and individual women artists: Bracha L. Ettinger, whose work Lyotard knew (Glowacka), and Helen Chadwick, whose work he did not (Jones). Two others attempt to read the figure of gender through practically all of Lyotard's oeuvre, as well as commenting on the political viability of his texts in relation to feminist political agendas (Coyle) and to postcolonial theory (Ivekovic). And finally, the figures of particular women, we might even say particularly significant women, or women whose very identities unsettle the relationship between the feminine, particularity, and signification, haunt individual chapters: Eurydice (Glowacka), Jocasta (Williams), the infanticide Christine V. (Slade), and French porn star Lolo Ferrari (Sullivan).

Thus, the volume could have been organized differently. The choice to organize the book into sections which echo Lyotardian concerns rather than feminist ones is deliberate and noninnocent. Rather than being a collection of "feminist interpretations," the volume is intended to situate the concerns of gender theorists within Lyotard's work, within the problems which motivate and organize his body of writings, from more peripheral texts like "One of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggles," "Can Thought Go on Without a Body?," and "Femininity in Metalanguage," to the most central, book-length works, such as *The Postmodern Condition*, *Heidegger and "the jews,"* *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, *Discours, figure*, and *The Differend*. This way of conceiving the volume is intended to show that the concerns of gender theorists have always been there, in this body of work, and have continually structured and destabilized it throughout.

As stated above, the present interrogations of Lyotard's texts are from scholarly perspectives which identify as feminist more often than not. The result, however, is not to be taken as a portrait of Lyotard-the-Feminist, as an exhaustive exploration of the connections between Lyotard and The Feminists, or as a reference work which will close gaps or mediate disputes in present scholarship. In his afterword, James Williams asks: "How to resist that which thrives on circulation and mobility? By putting untreatable, immeasurable differences into circulation." I will borrow his words to describe the aims of this collection: 1) to indicate and think around some untreatable, immeasurable differences and 2) to put these accounts to work in the circulation of scholarship. Thus, there will be a continuous placing in question of feminist identity and scholarship and of the relationship between thinking and politics, for which both feminist theory and Lyotard's work call. Interdisciplinarity here will mean not only that we are scholars in diverse disciplines but that the question of gender demands transgressions of disciplinary boundaries and academic agendas. If gender explodes philosophy, who is the "we"—collected, anthologized, catalogued, peer reviewed, *and* working to think against exchangeability and circulation, writing against cultural capital, always already different from itself—which remains after?

One learns from Lyotard to listen. The reader will find the aural effect here to be not exactly one of col/labο/ration, but rather that of the polyphony that is paralogy. How might this directive—"listen"—change scholarship? How might we read, write, polemicize, theorize, and think after this directive? The opportunity for feminism, in particular, to engage these questions is what motivates the present work.

Yes, Marie tells herself, they're paying me well, too. I'm part of the museum. No, not yet, we'll see, that's what's playing itself out. This is just a trial. If there is a second time, then perhaps. . . . That's how they're going to listen to me. Not what I have to say, but whether I'm worth preserving, if my stuff deserves to be committed to memory. My stuff is not on target, that's for sure. A little worry for Marie, and a laugh: what is not on target might well be what is most on target. (Lyotard, "Marie Goes to Japan")<sup>15</sup>

#### NOTES

I thank Robert Harvey for his analysis of "afterness" in "Afterward," in *Afterwords: Essays in Memory of Jean-François Lyotard*, ed. Robert Harvey (Stony Brook, N.Y.: State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2000).

Chapter epigraph from Jean-François Lyotard, "Marie Goes to Japan," in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 6.

1. See "Can Thought Go on Without a Body?," in *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), and "Interesting?," in *Postmodern Fables*.



2. Jean-François Lyotard, "One of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggles," in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (London: Blackwell, 1998), 120.
3. Lyotard, "Women's Struggles," 111.
4. Jean-François Lyotard, "Can Thought Go on Without a Body?," in *The Inhuman*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).
5. Jean-François Lyotard, "Return upon The Return," in *Toward the Postmodern*, ed. Robert Harvey and Mark Roberts (Amherst, Mass.: Humanity Books, 1999), 205–6.
6. Lyotard, "Marie . . . ," 8.
7. J. M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 29.
8. Lyotard in Gary A. Olson, "Resisting a Discourse of Mastery: A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard," in *JAC* 15.3 (1995), 9.
9. Lyotard in Olson, "Resisting . . . ," 21–22.
10. See *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (London: Routledge, 1990), 164.
11. Caroline Ramazanoglu, "Saying Goodbye to Emancipation?," in *The Politics of Jean-François Lyotard: Justice and Political Theory*, ed. Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 66.
12. Ramazanoglu, "Saying Goodbye . . . ," 66. The Lovibond quote is from Sabena Lovibond, "Feminism and Postmodernism," *New Left Review* 178 (1998): 5–28.
13. Ramazanoglu, "Saying Goodbye . . . ," 77.
14. See, among others, Ewa Ziarek, *Towards an Ethics of Dissensus* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001), Tina Chanter, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Emmanuel Levinas* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2001), Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2002).
15. Lyotard, "Marie . . . ," 9.