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Jean-François Lyotard, *Lectures d'enfance* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), 158 pp.

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[See table of contents](#)

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## BOOK REVIEW

### J.-F. LYOTARD: *LECTURES D'ENFANCE*

#### Bill Readings

**Jean-François Lyotard, *Lectures d'enfance* (Paris: Galilée, 1991), 158 pp.**

This series of highly accessible essays on largely literary topics will serve as a helpful introduction to Lyotard's work for the general reader and as an articulation of the impact of his philosophical studies on more explicitly literary readings. In this respect, his treatment of Joyce and allusions to Beckett should appeal to members of English departments (where much of the reception of his work has occurred) directly. *Lectures d'enfance* can thus take its place alongside the more general cultural criticism of Lyotard's recently published *The Inhuman* (trans. Bennington and Bowlby [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992]) as a series of articulations of Lyotard's deconstructive practices of reading, for literature (Joyce, Kafka, Valéry), politics (Arendt, Sartre) and psychoanalysis as a critical activity (Freud).

The terms of "infancy" and "birth" that resonate through the essays are not so much explicitly theorized as brought to name the predicament of language: that communicational discourse is haunted and deconstructed by another, wordless, voice to which it owes a debt that cannot be spoken and yet which must be witnessed to. This subterranean and minoritarian condition surfaces as sexual difference in Joyce's epic return, as the body in Kafka, as survival in Arendt's political philosophy, as poetry in Sartre's prose, as the aporia between the producer and the consumer of the work of art in Valery's account of aesthetic production, as the stuttering inflections of the Unconscious working over discourse in Freud. This linguistic predicament proceeds from the fact that we are born both too late and too early, belated with respect to a past tradition and premature with respect to "our own" strength. Hence, "infancy is the state of the soul inhabited by

something to which no answer can ever be supplied. Infancy is led on in its activities by an arrogant fidelity to this unknown guest to which it feels itself hostage. The infancy of Antigone. I understand infancy here as obedience to a debt, which one can call a debt of life, of time, or of the event -- the debt of being-there despite everything, and only the persistent sentiment of this debt, and respect for it, can save the adult from being only a survivor, from living under a suspended sentence of annihilation" (66). Most interestingly, this infant voice is strictly distinguished by Lyotard from any humanist optimism concerning the "child within us all", it remains the absolute negation of humanism, in that it situates being in a position of obligation rather than sufficiency, and art as the struggle to respond to this obligation without pretending to pay it off. Quite simply, an account of being as *aisthesis* (as being obliged to respond to voice that cannot be understood in advance, prepared for) that is in no way an "aestheticization". The strength of this account is that it situates the necessity of deconstructive analysis as not a method of interpretation but the rigor of thinking the "call" of the artwork in the full deconstructive force of that "call" in its claim upon the "human" subject.

The chapter on Joyce's *Ulysses* situates the text in relation to the classical tradition of epic, rephrasing the analytical terms of Auerbach's *Mimesis* (a distinction between a classical epic voice of sheer presence and an enigmatic biblical realism) to provide an utterly convincing account of "the fissure or crack that Jewishness (the Irish condition) produces on the beautiful urn of the homeric *periplum*" (23). Two brief pages on the sublime (19/20) are particularly valuable for the way in which they identify the resistant counter-aesthetic of the sublime as an assault on not merely the rule of signification but on all cultural syntheses that seek to fix and establish practices of meaning. The essay's final turn towards the ontological block of sexual difference links deconstruction to feminism in a way that surpasses previous (rather suspect) musings by other male deconstructive critics on the enigma of women by situating the anguish of language in Joyce's writings as an attempt to witness to the unspeakable fact of sexual difference and the unmanageable separation that it imposes upon consciousness.

The essay on Kafka works over the text *In the Penal Colony* in terms of the law's necessary dependence on an element that is intractable to its workings: the body. The infant body precedes the law in the sense that the law comes to it (with language) too late. The terrible writing-instrument of Kafka's text is thus understood as marking the attempt of the law to erase its first encounter with this intractable body, the event of an encounter on the basis of which the law will define and dispose of the body but which is nonetheless, as event, the locus of a "differend that cannot be converted into litigation" (43). The body must be sacrificed to the law for the law to be maintained, its blood (*sanguis*) must be turned into the extended discourse of bloodshed (*cruor*), written blood. But no amount of bloodshed can wipe away this prefatory encounter that marks the law's seizure of the body, in all its criminal innocence of the law. The insensible touch of this first encounter

thus marks a moment of *aisthesis*, so that the body is not born first of all to the speech of the law but to the infancy (*in-fans*, speechless) of the aesthetic, pre-inscribed on the body. This first birth is not that of a freedom but of an obligation that precedes any legal attempt to regulate that obligation: the body "is submitted to the regime of an irremediable heteronomy by the fact that it constitutes itself as having been *touched*, prior to any warning, before having been able to provide a response to this touch and to become responsible for it" (50).

The essay on Hannah Arendt's political philosophy is noteworthy for its situation of the problematic of the survivor (something which Lyotard has treated at length in *Heidegger and "the jews"*) in terms of this debt. Lyotard insists on the condition of the survivor: that of having to face the absolute enigma of the question "why me?" (77). Only by keeping this question open can a relation to tradition be anything other than a living death in the face of the already-there, a mere survival. On this basis Lyotard enters into a fascinating critique of Arendt's writings on totalitarianism, which identifies Western democracy, by virtue of its commitment to the principles of "development" and "performance", as the totalitarianism of the administrative communications network, a more subtle and "efficient" if less individually threatening form of totalitarianism than the Nazi-Stalinist hierarchy (85). He thus insists that the question of community is not exhausted by participatory citizenship. This essay stands as one of the most concise and forceful formulations of the radical implications of deconstruction for political thought that is currently available, particularly valuable in that its generous critique of Hannah Arendt articulates it within and against a mainstream tradition in political philosophy.

The essay on Sartre is the least interesting in the volume. It has already been published in translation by Minnesota, as a preface to Hollier's *The Politics of Prose*. Nonetheless, the general theme of counterposing a politics of poetry to the arid alienation of Sartre's political prose, a double scene of writing by which Sartre himself is defeated in all his posturing as hero of the Party of the masses, makes the trenchant criticisms of Sartre into something more valuable than an exercise in shadow boxing on the Boulevard St. Michel.

The discussion of Valéry on the status of the art object is fascinating in the brevity and clarity of its phrase-analysis. Adopting the analytical method of *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* in a way that will help many would-be epigones, Lyotard establishes Valéry's account of the necessary disorder of the artistic endeavour as something more than romantic confusion, as the mark of the absolute aporia between the producer and the consumer of art, the impossibility of any consensus that make might art into a matter of communication between these two instances. Art is inhabited by indeterminacy, both in the uncertainty of the artist's own phrase-linkages (what to do next, to make art?) and in the indeterminate *case* (is this art or

not?) with which the work confronts the consumer. "Such is the *resistance* of art, in which all its consistency consists: that determinate judgment cannot *exhaustively* apprehend its birth" (126).

The final essay on Freud is a meditation on the condition of voice in Freud's writing, the voice of the Unconscious as it inflects language (but does not speak) at each stage of analysis: in the life of the patient, in the analytic session, in the scholarly report on the analytic session. The force of Freud's work is to have been open enough to remain aware of the mute perserverance of this voice (a mute perserverance which Lyotard illuminatingly compares to the condition of writing in Beckett's prose trilogy) as a hesitation or stutter, a figural deformation of even the ordered theoretical discourse of the analyst as scholar of an object called "the human condition". This produces a persuasive reading of Freudian psychoanalysis as the encounter between theory and literature, the becoming-literary of theory in response to the timbre or phônè of the wordless Ucs. This brief essay is a reprise of all that is most forceful in Lyotard's writings on Freud, be they from *Discours*, *Figure* or *Rudiments Païens*. It ends with a insight into the condition of literature as in the grip of an untameable inflection of language by the Ucs. without permitting theory the status of a meta-discourse capable of itself escaping this grip. As such, the essay stands as a lucid demonstration of the deconstructive insistence that criticism is a text, that theory is not a metalanguage, in a manner that exceeds the merely relativist insistence on the necessity of style in analytic writing of such as Geoffrey Hartman.

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