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Jean-François Lyotard, *Why Philosophize?*, trans. Andrew Brown, Polity Press, 2013, viii + 123 pp., $13.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9780745670737.

Jean-François Lyotard's *Why Philosophize?* is the book version of manuscript notes he redacted for an undergraduate four-part introductory philosophy class. The lectures were delivered to students arriving at the Sorbonne. The book allows the reader to encounter Lyotard's early philosophical thought prior to the publication of his major works (published from the early 1970s and onward). The Lyotard we encounter in *Why Philosophize?* is both a remarkable philosopher and pedagogue. He is parting ways from formal Marxist thought and militancy (Lyotard, in 1964, had already parted from Cornelius Castoriadis and *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and was also about to leave *Pouvoir Ouvrier*) and beginning to explore the themes that marked French philosophy at the time—Freudian psychoanalysis (via Lacan's works), structuralism, language and discourse theory, and Hegelian dialectics amongst others. Hence, in these lectures, Jean-François Lyotard is genuinely asking his students and himself "why philosophize?" and how to tackle the political once we accept that the Marxist teleological emancipation narrative cannot be sustained anymore.

Why ask "why philozophize?" and not "what is to philosophize?" or "what is philosophy?" (for instance, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari did[1]). After all "what is philosophy?" is still today the title of many "introduction to philosophy" classes in North America and Europe. Lyotard does not ask the latter questions because they suppose that philosophy is already "there," present, never threatened. It postulates that philosophy has an *essence*, and for Lyotard, this cannot be true. Indeed, from his militant and philosophical experience with Marxism, Jean-François Lyotard developed the awareness that philosophy may disappear under the lead blanket of dogma and ideology; that is, as Corinne Enaudeau tells us in her Introduction to this volume, when the "lack" that motivates philosophizing is fulfilled (4). Hence, "why philosophize?" is a question that comes when one accepts that philosophy is not necessarily present, that it may very well be absent, and we should know why we want it amongst us. As Lyotard writes, "When we ask ourselves not 'what is philosophy?' but '*why* philosophize?', we are emphasizing how discontinuous with itself philosophy is—how it is possible for philosophy to be absent" (18). This theme of presence/absence will accompany the reader all along the lectures.

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[1] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996 [1991]).

One of the principal strengths of these lectures resides in the fact that Lyotard manages to address a number of contemporary themes that marked—and still do today—the major philosophical debates of the time by relying on the Greek authors often "forced" into the curriculum of mandatory introductory philosophy classes. In *Why Philosophize?* Heraclitus, Socrates, and Plato meet Hegel, Kant, Spinoza, Descartes, Husserl, and Freud in such a manner as to capture the interest of most recalcitrant students and bring them to "love wisdom" (*philosophia*). Hence, this monograph could be an excellent pedagogical tool for teachers, but it also addresses itself to a wide audience, such as anyone who is interested in French philosophy, continental philosophy, language theory, (post)structuralism, psychoanalysis, and Marxist theory amongst others. For the students and scholars working on the Islamicate world, the book may be of interest especially to theorize and think about questions of identity (such as various nationalisms, [Pan]Arabism, and Zionism), political violence, and political revolutions (such as the so-called Arab Spring). Even if these lectures do not engage the topic of "Islamic thought" or "Islamic philosophy" *per se*, they nevertheless formulate a powerful critique of Eurocentric philosophy and its claim to constitute the benchmark for what is to be considered proper thought. As such, the book may very well contribute to the actual debate on what constitutes "proper" philosophy, what is Islamic philosophy, or simply whether non-Europeans can meet the benchmarks set by Western philosophy and think at all?[2] He does so by formulating a critique of Marxist theory and its universalistic claims, and by reminding us that philosophy is not always there. That philosophy may very well be absent. Here, one can read between the lines, and deduce that Lyotard might very well have had in mind the Third Reich and Stalin's *gulags* as recent historical episodes that testify to this glaring absence, and the barbarity that accompanies the stupidity of such enterprises. The "[n]othing can be taken for granted" (117) that Lyotard declares in the fourth chapter points to these dark moments. This simple reminder is one of the most powerful critiques of Eurocentrism one can formulate and remains a powerful tool of postcolonial and critical thought.[3]

The four lectures are preceded by a somewhat "intimate" introduction by one of Lyotard's daughters who is also a philosophy professor, Corinne Enaudeau. It introduces the book by situating it in Lyotard's oeuvre and life while also hinting towards answers to the book's guiding question.

The central theme of the first lecture is desire. Lyotard begins by exploring presence/absence—the "contradictory, contrasting situation" lying at the heart of philosophy (19). In fact, it is said that philosophy takes place in a lack, i.e., a lack of unity and essence. Philosophy is discontinuous with itself or, as Lyotard puts it, "Philosophy misses itself (*la philosophie se manque elle-même*)" (17). It is this lack that is the source of desire. If this lack would be fulfilled, there simply would be no more philosophy, but ideology and dogma. Hence, philosophy is motivated by a desire for unity that keeps failing.

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[2] See for instance: Hamid Dabashi's critique of Eurocentrism in philosophical thought in, "Can Non-Europeans Think?," *Al Jazeera*, January 15, 2013, (accessed on May 11, 2015) at: <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/01/2013114142638797542.html>; Edward Said, "Secular Criticism," in *The Edward Said Reader*, eds., Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 218-242; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subalterns Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, , eds., Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

[3] As such, Lyotard's criticism echoes Fanon's and Césaire's; for instance, when the former wrote that the violence against the Jews was the result of "a colonial system in the very heart of Europe" (Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays* [New York: Grove Press, 1969], 33), and the latter wrote that what the European Jews experienced is certainly not an inexplicable aberration of History, but a continuation of Europe's "colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the 'coolies' of India and the 'niggers' of Africa" (Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* [New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001], 14).

Lyotard is here critical of the dualist and causal logic that separates object and subject, which, according to the author "makes any serious approach to the question impossible" (20). Here it is made clear that desire does not establish a relation between a cause and an effect, but rather, "desire is the movement of something that goes out toward the other as toward something that it itself lacks" (20). Hence, the lack (what is desired) appears as a presence (in the form of a missing presence). This is the Lacanian desire's structuring dilemma of presence/absence (26). Philosophy here appears as a desire for this present absence, a desire reflecting back on itself. We philosophize because we let ourselves "go along with desire" while at the same time reflecting about it: "We philosophize because it [*ça*] desires" (43).

In the second lecture, Lyotard starts with an encounter with Hegel from which, he tells us, the philosopher's desire is one that reflects back on itself—as it is established in the first lecture—"because unity has been lost…[it is] the death of meaning" (44). That is, the realization that meaning has no stability in time, and that difference (and the Other) is at the center of identity/meaning.

This loss of unity does not stem from an original (as in "origins") event. As Lyotard tells us, "we are not setting out to solve the problem of origins" (60). Instead, it comes from history and its unfolding. In other words, this lecture asks the question of the presence/absence of philosophy in *time* (59). The point is that philosophy is continually present/absent, and yet, there is a common thread. This common thread is the history of philosophy. This is a "history of philosophy" here defined as: "a dispersal, a discontinuity that is an essential part of the words that seek to utter this unity" (65). It is the realization that the unity of one's philosophical work does not lie in a fully bounded theory but in a desire for a lost unity that is the "motive" (64-67). Taken as such, if there is one, "The origin of philosophy is today" (67). This is, with retrospection, a very interesting discussion for it preceded some of the great texts on the subject matter such as Foucault's *Nietzsche, Genealogy, History*.[4]

Amongst other things in this lecture, the discussion about Heraclitus is fascinating, as it reconciles Greek classics with contemporary continental philosophy. The argument is that there is no code hiding itself behind meaning (54). Heraclitus' point is "that unity is in multiplicity both as its harmony and its contradiction" (56), and this is of central importance. For Lyotard appears as an early post-structuralist in that he is already aware of the impossibility of establishing a "code," or what Roland Barthes had called a "meta-language"; a "structure" behind everyday language that would condition meaning.[5]

The third lecture pushes the discussion further into the realm of language and discourse theory. From the get go, Lyotard tells us that "philosophical activity consists in speech (*la parole*)" (70). If we accept this postulate, then philosophy faces the same aporias that language theorists such as Ludwig Wittgenstein—here evoked through the concept of "game" (80)—and Ferdinand de Saussure (87) are facing. Amongst these dilemmas is the problem identified in the preceding chapter: the absence of a metalanguage (or structure) and the play of difference for the production of meaning. Indeed, if there is really nothing that structures meaning except the void that is difference, if nothing speaks before the speech of the philosopher, Lyotard asks, why philosophize? It is what he calls the fantasy of the author, or of the Self (73-75). Or the idea that a bounded "Self" could be the origin of a thought that would then be translated in speech, without any help from a previous encounter with something else in the world, be it "material" or figurated. We "think" because there is something in the world that forces us to do so.[6]

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[4] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984 [1971]), 76-100.

[5] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1972 [1957]).

However, if there is indeed a structure, a meta-language, behind speech, why philosophize since everything has already been said? This is the second "preconception" that Lyotard wants to get rid of. Indeed, according to this "fantasy of the Muse," "we simply need to listen to the world" for "the meaning within things dictates and we merely have to transcribe" (75). This is also known as the myth of the transparency of language. As Michel Foucault wrote seven years later for his inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France*, "we must not imagine that the world turns towards us a legible face which we would only have to decipher;…there is no prediscursive providence which disposes the world in our favor."[7] This third lecture is indeed an articulated and complex critique of thinking/philosophizing as a prediscursive event. Signs (words) and meaning are always intertwined in a poetic (re)production. Lyotard uses the term *co-naissance* ("mutual-birth") which is a play on the French word for "knowledge" (*connaissance*), emphasizing the mutual (re)production of signs and meaning and the role of the latter in constituting "knowledge" and identity. In other words, Lyotard tells us that speech has the power to change what it utters (78) and, like Michel Foucault, that knowledge and power are intimately related.

What is fascinating about this lecture is that, following Roland Barthes,[8] Lyotard seams to be anticipating the works of Michel Foucault[9] and Gilles Deleuze[10] in a fashion that reinstates him as an early central figure of post-structuralism and amongst today's most fashionable philosophers. It even poses the question of the "order of discourse" (77), seven years before Michel Foucault used the phrase as the title of his first lecture at *Collège de France*. In some regards, Lyotard is 50 years before his time, for this lecture articulates a serious critique of the dualist subject/object theories; something that still lingers in contemporary philosophy, humanities, and social sciences. When it comes to discourse analyses and discourse/language theory, Lyotard refers—without naming them as such—to concepts such as polyphony for instance, when he poetically writes "We do not speak alone; and even when we speak alone, we're not alone" (80). Another unnamed concept could be power. Indeed, at some point, drawing on Heraclitus and later Saussure, Lyotard identifies language as a system of difference where the "harmony" of the system of meaning holds thanks to "the very war we wage against one another" when we speak or write (81). That is, to enter the "order of discourse" is "to enter the order of sociability" (82), and thus the (in)stability of meaning is inevitably political. Again, that all this is articulated in such a profound and thoughtful manner in 1964 puts Lyotard and these lectures ahead of their time.

The fourth and final lecture centers on the question of "what use, after all, *is* philosophy" (101). To answer, Lyotard formulates a constructive critique of the thought of

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[6] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, [1976]), 139.

[7] Michel Foucault, "Order of Discourse," *Social Science Information*, Vol. 10, No. 7 (1971), 22.

[8] Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen Magazine*, Nos. 5/6 (1967).

[9] For instance Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?", in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Book, 1984 [1969]), 101-120.

[10] For instance, see: Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*.

Karl Marx. He opens with Marx's idea that philosophical concepts and problems are grounded in material reality. For Marx, "philosophy is the daughter of desire" in that it seeks to create an ideal socio-political project in theory (or in "the metaphysical world") that would put an end to the imperfect of the "material" present. Lyotard does not throw out the baby with the bathwater and concurs with Marx that a philosophy serving its own ends is not worth much. Philosophy is always indebted to the "material" world. However, he is mostly critical of Marx for the latter's project is a teleological one that would "give in speech a definitive answer" (108) and end all politics. Indeed, against Marx, Lyotard argues that there is simply "no infallible politics. Nothing can be taken for granted" (117). Even if we want to change the world through what Marx called "transformative action" (which, for him, excludes philosophy, ideology, etc.), we cannot do away with a theory, or philosophy (113). In fact, even if we are "'throwing ourselves into action', as the saying goes, we do not evade—we evade less than ever—this necessity, […] which turns action as well as speech, my relation with the other and my bodily existence, into an exchange" (114). Indeed, a little further he writes:

> you will find no refuge, not even in action that, far from being a shelter, will expose you more openly than any meditation to the responsibility of naming what needs to be said and done, in other words of recording, hearing and transcribing, at your own risk, the latent meaning of the world "on which" (as the saying goes) you wish to act. (122)

What is the point of philosophy then? The answer is that philosophy, even if it is not an "action" as Marx conceived it, can transform the world. It does so by reflecting upon the "lack" from which individuals and collectivities suffer, "when the desire within reality comes to itself, […] when this lacked is named and, by being named, transformed" (122). Philosophy is a transformative force.

Why Philosophize? is a fascinating book revealing and illuminating the thought of Jean-François Lyotard in the making, long before his *Discourse, Figure.*[11] It is wonderfully and poetically written. Perhaps, then, it is apposite to leave Lyotard the last word—in fact, the last paragraph of the book—in answering the question "why philosophize?":

> So this is why we philosophize: because there is desire, because there is absence in presence, deadness in life; and also because there is our power that is not yet power; and also because there is alienation, the loss of what we thought we had acquired and the gap between the deed and doing, between the said and the saying; and finally because we cannot evade this: testifying to the presence of the lack with our speech. In truth, how can we not philosophize? (123)

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[11] Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, figure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011 [1971]).

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