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Lyotard's Future: Figure, Event, "Space Shivering"

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Abstract

Here I argue that, rather than asking about the possible role of "literature" in our age of globalization, one could also ask about the possible meaning of "our age of globalization" when this—the notion of a "current age of x"—is viewed from the perspective of "literature" (or more broadly of "art") as Lyotard understands it. For the ("journalistic") theory of our "current age of x" is after all a sort of grand narrative, a linear-temporal narrative of an emerging historical period, whereas Lyotard's (literary-artistic) *petits récits* move through the force of an incommensurable "figuration"—a metaphorical, linguistic-spatial jump "across time"—to enact the trans-temporal "event." Thus the disrupted narrative of postmodernism, which (working through the force of figure-event) expresses the simultaneity of past-present-future, "engulfs" the modernist grand narrative of an emerging present, the *Zeitgeist*-narrative of globalization. After reviewing Lyotard's theory (in books like *The Postmodern Condition*, *Pagan Instructions* and, for the "figuration" in/of Freud's dream-theory, *Libidinal Economy*) of poetic figure and narrative event, I look at his "Postmodern Fable"—set in a remote, trans-human future—about the end of the world, exploring the ways in which the "fabulous" poetic and narrative techniques serve here to undermine the significance of our own (or of any) "emergent" or "present age," indeed the significance of such terms as "human" or "story" or "history."

Keywords

figure, event, poetry, narrative, metaphoric, metonymic, trans-temporal space, dream-work, *petits récits*, incommensurability

That our present conception of "the globe" could radically change in the (relatively near) future is easily demonstrated by the narrative genre known as "science fiction." Thus, for instance, Philip K. Dick in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968) gives us a "decentered" earth or terrestrial globe:[1] after a colossal twenty-first-century war has wiped out billions of earthlings, most of the remaining ones are living on Mars. Since the real economic center is now Mars rather than earth, our conception of "globalization" will be de- and reterritorialized, or de- and recentered, literally displaced or shifted in/across space; interplanetary capital flows and telecommunications suggest "bi-globalism" rather than "mono-globalism," yet earth has now become in effect the marginal colony to Mars's imperial center. Dick portrays the few remaining humans on this "marginal" earth as lonely, alienated, increasingly exposed to fatal radiation from the recent nuclear war, surrounded by vast empty spaces and ubiquitous trash (now called "kipple"). The earth has become a huge garbage dump; everything seems to be falling apart, disintegrating; the space between the parts or particles is increasing (even if that between the planets has effectively decreased):

> In a giant, empty, decaying building which had once housed thousands, a single TV set hawked its wares to an uninhabited room. [... N]o one today remembered why the war had started or who, if anyone, had won. The dust which had contaminated most of the planet's surface had originated in no country [...]. Silence. It flashed from the woodwork and the walls [...]. It rose from the floor, out of the tattered gray wall-to-wall carpeting. It unleashed itself from the broken and semi-broken appliances in the kitchen, the dead machines. [...] Eventually everything within the building would merge, would be faceless and identical, mere kipple piled to the ceiling of each apartment. And, after that, the building itself would settle into shapelessness, buried under the ubiquity of the dust. [...] Isidore made his way down the echoing, empty hall to the stairs. [...] The silence, all at once, penetrated; he felt his arms grow vague. In the absence of [the others] he found himself fading out, becoming strangely like the inert television set which he

[1] The Indo-European base of "globe" is *glembh*, "to make round, clench, as the feet and hands," whence "climb," "clamber," "clump" (*Webster's* 549, 266). One is struck by this globe's "rough edges," by its localizing but also "humanoidizing," biophysical sense that underlies, perhaps deconstructs, the abstractly rational, logical-geometrical, Parmendiean-Platonic sense of "globe" as "sphere."

> had just unplugged. You have to be with other people, he thought. [... H]e saw the dust and the ruin of the apartment as it lay spreading out everywhere—he heard the kipple coming, the final disorder of all forms, the absence which would win out. It grew around him as he stood holding the empty ceramic cup; the cupboards of the kitchen creaked [...]. Reaching out, he touched the wall. His hand broke the surface; gray particles trickled [...] down, fragments of plaster resembling the radioactive dust outside. (Dick 15, 20, 203-12)

Imaginative narratives can predict the future with a certain kind of convincing "realism" especially when, like this one, they speak not just of the altered objective world but of our changing subjectivity. Such narratives suggest that whatever our current experience of (late-capitalist, high-tech, globalized-globalizing) society may be this is something that will quite possibly undergo a radical spatio-temporal shift or change (though not necessarily of the sort Dick predicts here); perhaps we must eventually enter an era of "post-globalization." On the other hand our conception of "literature" (from "letters," "writing")—we spoke and sang our narratives before writing them down, but wrote then down long before we ever started filming them—could so radically change that any of the ways in which we might now conceive of "written texts" (e.g., as digital ones, crossing in a mad frenzy through cyberspace) or indeed of "visual" ones will themselves become obsolete. Yet it is also in our (written-before-filmed) narratives of the future that we can most clearly see the possibilities even of this change in/of "writing" itself: literary writing may seem in effect to have created its own (future) change by imagining-and-writing it now, that is, may seem to have *now changed itself in the future*. As we see, for instance, in William S. Burroughs's and William Gibson's fiction and in any number of sci-fi novels and films beginning from the 1980s, "writing" can mean the writing of (genetic) codes or (computer) programs in/onto the human body/brain; it can be the carved designs of human hands in motion (laser-swords in *Star Wars*) as well as tattoos engraved by electric impulses on human skin; it can also be, as in Ralph Waldo Emerson ("The Poet") and Edgar Allan Poe (*Pym*), the "writing of nature," the carvings or designs created by purely natural forces.[2] For like "voice"

[2] Burroughs in *The Soft Machine* catches the writing-as-carving ("laser swords") image in typically surreal fashion: "With a phosphorescent pencil he traced the middle line of our bodies from the cleft under the nose down to the rectum—Then he injected a blue fluid of heavy cold silence as word dust fell from demagnetized patterns—I came back [with] thoughts and memories of the young Mayan drifting through my brain [...]" (90); in Poe's *Pym* an earthquake has caused

(as sound), writing has a trans-human, trans-organic capacity that suits it to inconceivable future transformations.

Thus we may well wonder whether literary writing might so change as to no longer be recognizable as "literary writing" (even taking "literary" in the most indefinite sense, perhaps as the middle and mediating position between "oral" and "cinematic") and/or (for this is a variation on the same question) whether we can finally distinguish between the power of literary narrative to predict changes in our world, our society and ourselves and its power to predict changes in *itself* (as literary writing)—especially if "writing" can also mean the biogenetic "codes" of the human body/nervous system/physiochemical brain. Here, however, rather than attempting to further pursue such perplexing issues, I would like to return to my initial point that literary narratives like Dick's (with its "world" where most earthlings live on Mars) can imagine or predict spatio-temporal shifts that seem to radically deterritorialize or decenter current (spatio-temporal) notions of our world, our globe, of "globalization." The disruptive force of the narrative "event" here lies in its *temporal* disruptiveness, that is, its "unpredictability" from our present standpoint in time/history. Yet the *narrative* disruption is closely related to *poetic* disruption: the figurative language of poetry "displaces meaning" in a quite radical way (even if only, apparently, within *langue*), one more "spatial" than "temporal."

I therefore propose that, by turning to Jean-Francois Lyotard's theory of the (literary, artistic) "figure" and "event," we shift the question "What is the possible role of literature in the age of globalization?" to the arguably more foundational question, "In what sense might our conception of 'globalization' be displaced, decentered, destabilized by 'literature'?" In books like *The Postmodern Condition* and *Instructions Paiennes* (*Pagan Instructions*) Lyotard gives a certain priority to art (defined in terms of the incommensurability or disruptive discontinuity of figure and event) over theory (defined as modernist "grand narrative"); that is, he discounts any abstract, totalizing theory, more specifically the theorizing of our "present" in terms of linear-temporal or narrative time, precisely by foregrounding the role of art, including literary art, on the basis of its irrational or non-theoretical meaning, its non-linear, non-syntagmatic-narrative, futuristic-and-primitive (or "pagan") nature. By turning to Lyotard, then, I am in effect inverting (if not quite

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marks (found to have meaning in the alphabets of several exotic languages) to be "written" on cave walls, perhaps parodying Emerson's "Nature is a symbolic language." The point is that the line between vibrating fingers (with no keyboard) and wind-blown sand may begin to be blurred. The choice of nineteenth-century writers in this context underscores the "simultaneity" of past-future.

reducing to absurdity) any question about the "role of literature in our age of globalization" by asking, rather, what possible sense "age of globalization" could have when viewed from the perspective of "art" in something like Lyotard's sense. After a brief excursus, therefore, on our illusion of the "uniqueness of the present era" in relation to Mallarmé's distinction between the in-folded "book" (literature as "pure art") and the flat surface of the "newspaper" (the anti-art, anti-depth "journalistic surface" of postmodernism, cultural studies, globalization theory), I will turn to Lyotard's conception of the (disruptive, incommensurable) poetic figure and narrative event, and finally to his speculative vision of a remote, post- or trans-human future which (together with our speculative awareness of a remote, pre-historic, trans-human past) helps to underscore the virtual non-existence of the present age, that is, its extreme brevity and relative insignificance in the very long course of trans-historical, trans-human time.

Mallarmé's *Éventail*, *Éventualité*, *Événement*

The notion that literary writing can predict its own changes, can "now change itself in the future" is already implicit in the French symbolist poetry of the late nineteenth century. Walter Benjamin (in "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire") and Michel Foucault (in "What Is Enlightenment?") both see Baudelaire as the quintessential "modernist" due to this early symbolist's awareness of the present as a rapidly-changing time, one that is "accelerating-into-the-future"—as Jürgen Habermas describes Hegel's proto-modernist view of the present (6)—a time "outside-of-itself" which nonetheless must be heroically "frozen" in the poetic act. Yet it is really the more radically indeterminate, self-negating poetics of Baudelaire's successor Mallarmé (who died in 1898) that are "expanded" by the twentieth-century French poststructuralists. One of Mallarmé's recurring images is that of the future as dice-throw. This is the central theme of his late long poem, "A Dice Throw Never Will Abolish Chance," and we get a variation on it in one of his "fan" poems, "*Éventail*": "But if my stroke [*battement*] liberates [...] / like a profound shock [*choc profond*], / this frigidity will melt [*se fond*] / into the laughter of a drunken blossoming [*fleurir ivre*], / To cast the sky in fragments [*en détail*] [...]" (67-68). This same fan whose wing-like flutter or "stroke"—a romantic variation on the violent dice-throw—will "cast the sky in fragments" (literally "in detail") also appears in "*Autre Éventail*" ("Another Fan"), written for the poet's daughter:

A twilight coolness
comes to you at each fluttering [*battement*; "beating," "battle"],
whose captive stroke [*coup prisonnier*]
delicately pushes back the horizon [*horizon*].
Vertigo [*Vertige*]! Behold space shivering [*que frissonne L'espace*]
like a vast kiss [*un grand baiser*]
which, driven mad [*fou*] by coming to birth for no one,
can neither gush forth nor calm itself. (66)[3]

This "*éventail*" can also mean "range of choices," and is related to *événement*, "event," and *éventualité*, "possibility" (Larousse 207). Mallarmé's extremely condensed poetic form combines, in a free, playful way, metaphysical abstraction with the abstract "spatial" art of modern poetic metaphor, the art of combining two normally quite unrelated words (signifiers) by "jumping across," thus in effect violently disrupting, *langue*. This poetic form takes language to its limit, perhaps vibrates it at the limit, in other closely related ways—for instance, by playing on the most literal, etymological or archaic meaning of words, and/or on the shared roots or elements of words which have in modern usage quite different meanings. The French suffix "*tail*" is related to both "cut" and (metonymically) "size," so that "*éventail*" (a "fanned-out range") might be interpreted as "event-cut" or "event-size," just as "*détailler*" is to "*break down* into details." The image of "casting the sky in fragments" by fanning oneself in a kind of "dice-throw" (the fan fragments or dissolves both future and sky through its "beating") is made more explicit in Mallarmé's first fan poem (an *Éventail* of/for his wife):

Just like in language [*Avec comme pour langage*][4]
nothing except a beating in the skies [*battement aux cieux*]

[3] One might almost call this "kiss" of the wing-beating, heart-fluttering fan a "diasporic" kiss, since in its etymological or literal sense, that is, its Greek sense, "diaspora" means "to sow across" (*diaspeirein*) and thus "scatter" (as in a farmer scattering seeds across the ground); "spore" and "sperm" also come from *sperein*, whose Indo-European base is *sperg* or "spark" (*Webster's* 390, 1369). Admittedly this seems a much greater "leap" than is made by shifting from the Jewish "diaspora" (a more traditional usage of the term) to e.g., the Chinese one; in fact, assuming these restrictions on the already metaphorically or metonymically extended sense of *diaspeirein*, one could hardly do better than go back to that primordial, prehistoric, "original" and thus grounding case: the diaspora of early or protohumans out of Africa some time before 100,000 B.C., according to a widely-accepted anthropological theory.

[4] Anthony Hartley's translation of this line is "With for language"; I use my own translation here for clearer meaning in this context.

> the future line of poetry frees itself [*Le future vers se dégage*]
> from the most precious dwelling-place [*logis*; "lodging," but we will also think, though they are not etymologically connected, of "logic," poetry's arch-enemy],
> wing swooping low, the messenger [*courrière*],
> this fan [...]. (65)

But here the "future" becomes more explicitly "the future (line of) of poetry."

"Literature," after all, coming from the word "letter," is nothing if not "literal" (and thus etymological). Mallarmé is (like Joyce) excited by the concrete materiality of language, by the very *letters* of the alphabet, though he immediately extends this sense of language's concreteness into the purely metaphysical realm: he speaks of the "miracle" of "words led back to their origin, which is the twenty-four letters of the alphabet, so gifted with infinity that they will finally consecrate language. Everything is caught up in their endless variations and then rises out of them in the form of the principle. Thus *typography becomes a rite*" (Adams 691; my emphasis). We may think Mallarmé is the proto-modernist *par excellence*, given his late nineteenth-century French symbolist "religion" of art ("*l'art pour l'art*"; art and more specifically poetry in effect replaces God), his *insistence* (to paraphrase Lacan's "Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious") on the physical presence of the "letter" in poetry. Indeed, in "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument" he makes an even easier target of derision for the late-twentieth-century theoretical standpoint of cultural studies/globalization theory by contrasting the mysterious inner sanctum of the "book" with the opened-out surface of the "newspaper":

> [...] the differences between the rag and the book [are] supreme. The newspaper is the sea; literature flows into it at will.
>
> [...]
>
> The foldings of a book, in comparison with the large-sized, open newspaper, have an almost religious significance. But an even greater significance lies in their thickness when they are piled together; for then they form a tomb in miniature for our souls.
>
> [...] the newspaper [...] can be summed up in the word: *press*. The result has been simply a plain sheet of paper upon which a flow of words is printed in the most unrefined manner. [...] After this, what else can the newspaper possibly need in order to overthrow the *book* [...]? It will need nothing [...] if the book delays as it is now doing and

> carelessly continues to be a drain for it. And since even the book's format is useless, of what avail is that extraordinary addition of foldings (like wings in repose, ready to fly forth again) which constitute its rhythm and the chief reason for the secret contained in its pages? Of what avail the priceless silence living there [...]? (Adams 691)

We also note here Mallarmé's awareness that his extreme-modernist position is doomed, for "what else can the newspaper possibly need in order to overthrow the *book* [...]? It will need nothing [...]," for the book "carelessly continues to be a drain for" the newspaper: this image may mean that literature (like hidden mountain springs, perhaps) continually flows into the sea's vast surface. The book's (poetry's, literature's) inward-coiled involutions that contain and obscure its "secret meanings" render it irrelevant to "the masses," for whom (at least *at the present time*) these meanings would be incomprehensible (unreadable, unreachable); Mallarmé's poetry, his poetic "sense," has been from the outset intentionally self-destructive, self-negating, "doomed." Self-negation is at the core of his aesthetic theory, for he thinks that "nothing lies beyond reality, but within this nothingness lies the essence of perfect forms. It is the task of the poet to reveal and crystallize these essences. [...] Once he stated: 'I become obscure, of course! if one makes a mistake and thinks one is opening a newspaper'" ("Stéphane Mallarmé").

Thus Jacques Derrida goes back, in "The Double Session" (*Dissemination*) to Mallarmé's inward "folds" (*pli*) with their deceptions, their doublings of truth or double-truths, a variation on his reading of Friedrich Nietzsche's "truth is a woman" in *Spurs*: *Nietzsche's Styles*, and Foucault also speaks in glowing terms of Mallarmé in a short essay related to the early *L'Histoire de la folie*, "Madness, the Absence of Work" (whose title assumes Roland Barthes's "work"/"text" distinction).[5] Foucault here ties the proximity of modern poetic language to the discourse of madness (yet

[5] According to Foucault,

> Literature itself (undoubtedly since Mallarmé) is in the midst of becoming [...] a language of which the utterance enunciates [...] the linguistic code that renders it intelligible as utterance [...]. By the end of the 19th century [...] literature had become utterance that inscribed in itself its own principle of decipherment. Or [...] it implied [...] in every word, the power to modify [...] the values and significations of the linguistic code to which [...] it belonged; it suspended the reign of that code in one actual gesture of writing. [...] Hence, too, that strange proximity between madness and literature. [... T]he being of literature, as it has been produced from Mallarmé to today, obtains the region where, since Freud, the experience of madness figures [...]. (296-97)

without identifying them), claiming that the code needed to interpret or unlock a modern-poetic text's (not work's) meaning is hidden (locked) inside the text itself. Or as Mallarmé puts it in the *Coup de dés*, "*cadavre par le bras écarté du secret qu'il détient* [...]," i.e., "a corpse kept apart by the arm from the secret it holds" (218-19), taking now this arm as that of the critical intelligence of a reader struggling and therefore failing to "understand" the poem. Similarly, Julia Kristeva says of Mallarmé's *Igitur*—a "poem" about the pure freedom and contingency of a poet's self-negating act—that "it has become impossible, beginning with a rupture that can be precisely situated in history, to make writing an object that can be studied by any means other than writing itself [...]. In other words, the specific problematic of writing breaks decisively with myth and representation to think itself in its literality and its space" (232).

Lyotard's Figure and Event

Lyotard says "the rule of the philosopher's discourse has always been to find the rule of his/her own discourse. The philosopher is thus someone who speaks in order to find the rule of what s/he wishes to say, and who by virtue of that fact speaks before knowing the rule, and without knowing it" (Andrew Benjamin xv). Although dogmatic, logocentric theory or philosophy could obviously not be reduced to "mere information"—even if one might think our current "globalizing" discourses, where I take "globalizing" to also imply "irresistibly fashionable," are becoming virtually indistinguishable from the "information network" they are attempting to describe—"our role as thinkers is to deepen our understanding of what goes on in language, to critique the *vapid idea of information*, to reveal an iremedial opacity at the very core of language" (qtd. in Andrew Benjamin xv; my emphasis).

This "opacity" calls to mind Mallarmé's poetry with its famous obscurity, its inward- or double-foldedness (Derrida), its concealing of its own interpretive code within itself (Foucault). "Opaque" (from Latin *opacus*, "shady") means literally "not letting light pass through." This "opacity at the core of language" really means the energy within language, the energy-field opened up by modern-poetic metaphors with their violent yoking-together of heretofore totally unrelated signifiers (Mallarmé's "laughter of blossoming" or "space shivering," Georges Bataille's "horse teeth of the stars"), by puns/wordplays/homonyms (where one signifier has more than one signified, or two signifiers have the same signified, like Lacan's

"Ladies" and "Gentlemen"), and other such disruptions which shake *langue* at or to its very limit. But this shaking of the totality of *langue* (Deleuze's figure in "He Stuttered") means that, in order to even attempt to "represent" or "comprehend" such disruptions or vibrations, we must in effect stand "outside" language, as biophysical beings, and begin looking at *it* as something that is also (paradoxically) non-linguistic, a sort of "thing" or "object," even a kind of biophysical entity. This too is what it means for the "literary philosopher"—who can perhaps hardly distinguish literary writing (artistic writing, art-writing) from theory-writing—to "speak before knowing the rule of his own discourse" since he wants to "reveal an opacity at the very core of language."

In this respect Lyotard is moving beyond the writing-embeddedness or pan-textuality of structuralism and poststructuralist semiotics (including Lacan and Derrida). In *Discours, figure* he attacks

> the notion that everything is a text by insisting that the sensible field of vision functions as a figure for "textual space." […] Lyotard […] insist[s] that there is always a figural other to textuality at work within and against the text. On this basis, he criticizes Derrida for containing the deconstructive force of the figural by identifying it wholly with the internal problematic of linguistic signification. (Readings 5)

Lyotard then insists on the "opacity of the signifier as the figural condition of its double appeal to the textual and the visible, rather than as merely the loss or failure of meaning [… L]anguage simultaneously draws on two heterogeneous negations: that of opposition (text) in signification and that of heterogeneous difference (vision) in reference" (Readings 6).

Lyotard's project with regard to "the figure" therefore has two stages. The first entails "juxtaposing the Saussurian structuralist account of linguistics with the phenomenology of vision elaborated by Merleau-Ponty, and so showing how vision functions as a figure for the structural linguistics on which semiology is based" (Readings 7). Thus structuralism's account of textual space is opposed to Merleau-Ponty's account, in *The Primacy of Perception*, of visual space. The seeing eye participates in the visible world it views: the eye moves in order to see. "This corporeal involvement is […] the chiasmatic imbrication of subject and object in perception. […] Phenomenology insists on the corporeality of the eye […]; the way the world paints itself on the rods and cones of the retina, the agitation of the two eyeballs in focusing"; language is "given to be phenomenologically seen" as well as "to be read

or decoded. The eye moves, it participates in the visible, lending an opacity to the visible as a resistance or friction on the retina" (Readings 11-12).[6]

However, Lyotard is arguing not just that "vision appears as a figure in the textual conception of space," but also that "textuality appears as a figure in the phenomenological understanding of perception," which brings us to the second stage. For "Lyotard will go on to deconstruct the phenomenology of vision in its turn, moving from Merleau-Ponty to Freud to evoke the work of unconscious desire as a figure for the phenomenology of conscious perception" (Readings 7). In *Libidinal Economy* and "The Dream-Work Does Not Think," Lyotard explores Freud's *Traumarbeit* (dream-work) of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Chapter 6), which transforms the *Traumgedanken* (dream-thoughts) into the *Inhalt* (contents, manifest dream) through the operations of condensation, displacement, "considerations of figurability" and secondary revision. But Lyotard keeps in the foreground the notion of dream-*work* as just that, the (figural because non-representable) force of the *work* of transformation, of *desire*. At the outset of his "Dream-Work" essay he speaks of "the problematics of work versus discourse."[7]

Freud's *Verdichtung*, condensation—the compression of many dream-thoughts into the much smaller "space" of the manifest dream—and *Vershiebung*—displacement of the energies or "contents" of the dream-thoughts into those of the actual dream—were interpreted by Jakobson, and later somewhat differently by Lacan, as poetic figures of speech. While Lacan ("The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious") is aware of *langue*'s apparent metaphoric verticality that plays against

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[6] Fredric Jameson also catches this phenomenological side when he mentions how "conceptual art" is grasped—here the move "beyond Kant" is clear—only when "the categories of the mind itself […] are flexed, their structuring presence now felt laterally by the viewer like musculature or nerves of which we normally remain insensible, in the form of those peculiar mental experiences Lyotard terms paralogisms—in other words, perceptual paradoxes that we cannot think or unravel by way of conscious abstractions and which bring us up short against the visual occasions" (157).

[7] More precisely,

> It is easy to show that each of these operations is conducted according to rules which are in direct opposition to those governing discourse. The dream is not the language of desire, but its work. Freud, however, [claims] that the work of desire is the result of manhandling a text. Desire does not speak; it does violence to the order of utterance. This violence is primordial [...]. At the margin of discourse [the figure] is the density within which what I am talking about retires from view; at the heart of discourse it is its "form." [*Phantasie*] is at once the "façade" of the dream and a form forged in its depths. It is a matter of a "seeing" which has taken refuge among words, cast out on their boundaries, irreducible to "saying." (Andrew Benjamin 19)

its Saussurian-Jakobsonian metonymic horizontality or "linearity" ("If this linearity is necessary […] it is not sufficient" [Lacan 87]), and while he agrees with Jakobson that the key function of metaphor is that of substitutability, he nonetheless sees this function of substitution as operating, finally, along or through the "only" axis, the horizontal (syntagmatic, metonymic) chain of signifiers.[8] Lyotard however feels that both Jakobson and Lacan (in their different ways) remain too fully embedded within the textuality ("discursiveness") of discourse.

In other words—here we come back to the notion of Freud's dream-work as the *force* of desire, which Lyotard thinks cannot, as figure, be reduced to discourse—there *is* a modern-poetic spark generated by "real" metaphor, that conjunction of two *totally unrelated* signifiers (star-teeth), a spark or force of disruption which goes beyond even the "vertical axis" of Jakobson (itself still fully embedded within *langue* or discourse) as well as Lacan's merely "metonymic metaphors" (89), rupturing or destabilizing the whole system of *langue*. For Lacan's "metaphors" are merely contiguous, horizontally-connected metonyms; thus his sliding-across between signifiers is authorized, predictable.[9] Lyotard explicitly critiques Lacan in "Dream-Work":

> When the substitution is authorized, we no longer have [...] a metaphor. We have simply an instance of a choice between terms which stand in a paradigmatic relation to each other, any one of which would serve

[8] Lacan's awareness of "verticality" is perhaps clearer than what Lyotard implies, even if it is a horizontally-mediated verticality. Lacan says: "There is in effect no signifying chain which does not have attached to the punctuation of each of its units a whole articulation of relevant context suspended 'vertically' from that point" (87). See also the following note.

[9] In all fairness to Lacan, one notes that he is a talented poet in his own right, and further that his "not sufficiently unauthorized" (i.e., too connectable, predictable, metonymic) metaphoric connections still have a rather powerful poetic spark—a point which would seem to qualify the terms of Lyotard's "surrealist" critique. Thus in "Insistence of the Letter" Lacan performs a riff on Valery's "*Au Platane*" reminiscent of Rimbaud, symbolism, surrealism, 1950s beat verse (e.g., Ginsberg's *Howl*):

> For even broken down into the double spectre of its vowels and consonants, [the word "tree"] can still call up with the robur and the plane tree the meanings it takes on [... I]t erects on a barren hill the shadow of the cross. Then reduces to the capital Y, the sign of dichotomy [...]. Circulatory tree, tree of life of the cerebellum [great line!], tree of Saturn, tree of Diana, crystals formed in a tree struck by lightning, is it your figure [as shape of a crack] which traces our destiny for us in the tortoise-shell cracked by the fire [!!!], or your lightning which causes that slow shift in the axis of being to surge up from an unnamable night into the "Ev πανται [one in all] of language" [...]. (87)

> equally well at that particular point in the chain. Hence the choice of one of them [...] results in no *overloading*, no "*overdetermination*" of the statement. (Andrew Benjamin 34; my emphasis)

However, the "true metaphor, the trope, begins with a too-wide gap, the transgression of the range of acceptable substitutes sanctioned by usage. André Breton is right [...]: 'For me the strongest (surrealist) image is the most highly arbitrary one'" (Andrew Benjamin 34).

While Lyotard does then see our dreams as being different, insofar as they are "outside discourse," from even our poetry with its disruptive figures of speech—dreams being closer to something like a figurative semiology, a semiology of the phenomena of natural expression—the point is that he also sees narrative and poetic discourse as having disruptive fissures of (dream-like) figuration, unrepresentability, incommensurability. And the figurative force of Freud's condensation and displacement are finally temporal as well as spatial, since time and memory are also being compressed into the manifest dream, itself a kind of narrative:

> For Lyotard, the Unconscious does not speak; it works. [...] Poetic metaphor [...] evokes a heterogeneous difference, a pure singularity that does not enter the regulated system of linguistic oppositions but departs from it [...]. There is [a] displacement of the code by figural differences, a displacement which is not the introduction of another kind of code, but which has itself the singular quality of an event, a kind of catastrophe, an earthquake as it were. The seismic event is the effect of the clash of two heterogeneous yet juxtaposed fields—the incommensurable: "[...] if [difference] is the event, the lapsus or the orgasm that come to our pen [...] it's not by chance, it is because in these 'cases,' unlike in signification [...], *the division is not that of two terms* placed on the same level [...], ultimately reversible given certain operative conditions, but on the contrary *the* '*relation*' *of two heterogeneous* '*states*' *at the same time juxtaposed in irreversible anachronism*" [*Discours, figure* 137; Lyotard's emphasis]. *Discours, figure* situates the event as the site at which the *earthquake of the figural fractures discourse*. (Readings 41-42; my emphasis)

Lyotard then thinks "literature" or "literary writing," by manifesting its own hidden, unrepresentable, incommensurable side, lays bare the opacity of the

"figure" within its own discourse, rather than—like logocentric-theoretical writing/theory—attempting to keep its own opacity, its figurativeness "hidden." By turning to Lyotard's notion of the narrative "event" we introduce the (correlative) idea that the historical moment of "our" fascination—that fascination *prescribed* for us by an all-encompassing "theory-as-global-newspaper"—with a (putatively) worldwide "e-merging present," one which finds us all in 2005 to be *completely different from what we were* at some indeterminate point in the recent past, is really an Hegelian *Zeitgeist*-moment. That is, this "global moment" is not at all a radical rupture of the temporal-historical axis but one in a series of contiguous (syntagmatic, metonymic) moments proceeding along that axis, for globalization theory is itself, as theoretical discourse, an attempt to *narrate* this emerging present, bring it within a larger narratorial order. This is really a moment within a modernist "progressive time" or "rapidly-progressing-time," yet as such it is a radically limited temporal standpoint, one easily encompassed or engulfed by Lyotard's "time of the event" (as expressed *via* the *petit récit*, "little narrative"), his time of the remote past and remote future:[10]

> The turn toward the postmodern [...] is thus a transposition of the concern of *Discours, figure* with figures in the *space* of representation into the *temporal* domain. [...] Lyotard is not interested in the postmodern as the description of the contemporary *Zeitgeist*. For him the postmodern comes both before and after modernism, in the sense that it is necessarily present as a figure for modernist discourse. [... It is] the *figural other* that necessarily accompanies modernism. (Readings 53-54; my emphasis)

[10] A primarily biophysical rather than socio-historical model suggests that "we" (as physio-chemical bodies/brains) are not *really* so different from what "we" were at least 30 thousand years ago, when early modern humans (with brain capacities potentially equal to our own as judged by skull size, though of course with much less "technology") first emerged. Jameson—though his Marxist critique of Lyotard depends finally on the sort of Hegelian-teleological thinking that Nietzsche, Derrida, Lyotard have been at pains to overcome—notes that today "virtually any observation about the present can be mobilized in the very search for the present itself and pressed into service as a symptom and an index of the deeper logic of the postmodern, which imperceptibly turns into its own theory and the theory of itself" (xii). This "deeper logic" that becomes "the theory of itself" is precisely what is being expressed in the grand narrative of globalization theory as a way of (syntagmatically) combining "virtually any observation about the present" on the opened-out surface of its vast (Mallarméan) "newspaper." Lyotard's "event" has, I would suggest, like (but also differently from) Merleau-Ponty's "phenomena," a much closer connection to the physical sciences than to the socio-political ones.

We must distinguish between Lyotard's understanding of "postmodernism" and the standard (*Zeitgeist*-based) view which sees it as "the contemporary historical *moment* [...;] the contemporary critique of modernism; [...] the negative moment of modernist self-consciousness [...]."[11] Since the *event* is "the quality of temporal difference which cannot be grasped within a conceptual structure of time as past, present and future," Lyotard's "turn to the postmodern is precisely an attempt to think the event as figure, to pose the question of how history makes the non-present (past, future) present"; it is an attempt to evoke "the figural force of the event in the thought of historical time." This event is always a "singularity," an "occurrence after which nothing will ever be the same again," that which always "happens in excess of the referential frame within which it might be understood, disrupting or displacing that frame"; it is "the figural excess [of its own] eventhood or singularity [...] over any meaning that may be ascribed to [it ...] (Readings 43, 55-57).[12]

Lyotard then sees linear, chronological, historical time as having the form of a *narrative*, that is, as being primarily structured along what Jakobson would call the syntagmatic (horizontal, metonymic) axis: first A happened, and then B happened. It may be easiest to see how the event, in "making the non-present (past, future) present," implies a "figural" disruption of this narrative-historical time by returning to our earlier discussion of Lyotard's reading of the Freudian dream-work. Lyotard disagrees, we recall, with Lacan's reduction (within *langue*) of metaphor to the "predictable substitutability" of the metonym because the truly poetic metaphor conjoins two totally "unconnected" signifiers, making a totally *unpredictable* connection. But what if the "entire text" (entire poem or narrative) could be taken as a "metaphor" for something (an Other) that is totally different, unexpected, unpredictable, thus making this text incommensurable with itself? Then the event (*événement*) might give us something like "the figural excess [of its own] eventhood or singularity [...] over any meaning that may be ascribed to [it ...]"

[11] For Lyotard postmodernism is not "a moment in the consciousness of things for the artist, for the people, for the spirit of an age"; it is rather an "event": to "understand the event as if it were a state of the soul or spirit is to ignore the eventhood of the event [...], to reduce figure to discourse"; it is "to reduce the temporal *aporia* which the postmodern opens in representation to the status of a problem within representation," because "once the postmodern is formally recognizable, [...] rather than testifying to the unpresentable, it will have presented it" (Readings 55-57).

[12] As Readings points out, this last notion or figure is rather close to that of the Derridean "supplement," the "'necessary surplus' that disrupts the propriety and self-presence of logocentric Being in that it is both necessary to Being and yet not part of it. The thought of Being that grounds the distinction of inside from outside, presence from absence, itself relies on an excess that blurs the boundary" (57).

perhaps like the "stroke" (*battement*) of Mallarmé's fan (*éventail*) that "liberates / like a profound shock [*choc profound*] / [...] To cast the sky in fragments [...]."

However, while the figural time of the event *would* be something like this (spatio-temporal) metaphor of the Other fully beyond the syntagmatic, beyond narrative, *if* we could represent it, we of course cannot do so—the *spatial figure of the temporal event* is by definition unrepresentable, it is something we could only enact or directly experience rather than represent. The "grand narrative" that tries to represent in discourse, to express the meaning or content of all the little narratives (*petits récits*) which "embody" specific events, cannot finally escape embedment within narrativity:

> The metalanguage which speaks of narrative must be reminded that it is itself a narrative. The figure of narrative returns to all attempts to speak the literal meaning of narrative. All attempts to reduce narrative's *syntagmata* [horizontal axis] to a paradigm [vertical axis], to say what narrative is a metaphor *for*, are themselves syntagmatic linkings, narratives. There is no discourse free from figures—the dream of literal discourse, if it were possible, would be the *litotes* of figurality. (Readings 71)[13]

Thus Lyotard wants to focus on the *petits récits*, which enact or perform "cultural events" rather than trying to represent them, their narrativity functioning purely as "the rhetorical figure that opens culture as a site of transformation and dispute." These "little narratives [...] resist incorporation into such totalizing histories [by] the way in which the event of performance [...] functions as a figure, so as to displace the scientific claims of narrative theory" (Readings 63). These *petits récits*, of course, bring us back to "literature" and the priority "over theory" given to it (most explicitly in *Instructions paiennes*) by Lyotard:

> "Literature" here is to be understood as a series of little narratives which are not accountable to a restricted economy [...]. Rather, it is an

[13] "Litotes": "understatement for effect, in which something is expressed by a negation of the contrary (e.g., 'not a few regrets')" (*Webster's* 826). Perhaps Readings means (his "figure" is) that the dream of literal discourse, in necessarily "understating" figurality, only the more strongly asserts it. "Litotes" (meaning "plain and simple") is from the Indo-European base *(s)lei*, "slimy," "wet," "sticky," hence Greek *leios*, "smooth" (820)—allowing a metonymic slide to the poetic notion of "sliding signifiers."

> attempt to upset the assurance with which narratological discourse [e.g., that of Hegel] might claim exhaustively to describe all aspects of narrative's modifications of meaning, to put an end to narration [...]. Artistic invention does not produce anything that would not itself be subject to further displacement by aesthetic invention [since] art is a series of little narratives [which do not] promise to reveal a new truth. [... A]rt is the site of resistance to metalanguages. (Readings 70-74)

Art/literature for Lacan makes in effect a metaphoric leap or "displacement" on the vertical axis beyond the syntagmatic plane of the narrative to another level of discourse, one which does *not* have its meaning made clear, laid bare, spelled out, completed, encapsulated by another (level of) syntagmatic narrative (i.e., by a metanarrative, grand narrative).[14] By performing such a "paradigm shift" art/literature, or the "aesthetic of the sublime and experimental" as Lyotard calls it in *The Postmodern Condition* and *Instructions paiens*, by reminding all metalanguages that they are still (syntagmatic, discursive) narratives, disrupts the narratological-theoretical discourse's presumption that it can "tell the truth" (or the "story of the truth"). However, literature's (little narratives') vertical or metaphoric "shift" also has a function reaching beyond this purely negative one, insofar as its/their praxis not of innovation but of invention does after all serve to open a certain space. In *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard distinguishes between the *paralogism* ("beside or beyond logic," "illogical") of "pagan or postmodern aesthetic invention" and the "merely *innovative* function of art [in] the modernist understanding of the avant-garde." While innovation "seeks to make a new move within the rules of the language game 'art'" so as to "revivify" its truth, paralogism "seeks the move that will displace the rules of the game, the 'impossible' or unforeseeable move" that "changes the rules in the pragmatics of knowledge. [...T]he condition of art is postmodern or paralogical when it both is and is not art at the same time [...]; postmodern art does not seek a truth at all but seeks to testify to an event to which no truth can be assigned" (Readings 73-74).

Thus our current (globalized/globalizing/globalization) theory can hardly a-

[14] Admittedly it is a bit dangerous to use "displacement" in this context—though one is often tempted to use it as a synonym for "vertical leap to another textual (meta-textual, para-textual) level"—since Lacan identifies Freud's condensation with metaphor and displacement with metonym, while Jackobson correlates Saussurian contiguity with both "Freud's metonymic 'displacement' and synecdochic 'condensation'" and his similarity with "Freud's 'similarity' and 'symbolism'" (Lacan 50).

void being a "grand narrative" since, however much it may claim to be focused on the "emergent present" as a rapidly-accelerating, rapidly-changing "time" and so deny that it still harbors the Hegelian presupposition that we are moving toward some historical "end-point" (a fully globalized world?), in fact as theoretical discourse it is inevitably trying to complete a totalized "narration" (explanation) of this world-present by combining the "meanings" of all those *petits récits* (in the manner perhaps, again, of journalism, Mallarmé's flattened-out surface of the newspaper). "Art" on the other hand is (for Lyotard) fragmentary and paralogic, leaping on the vertical-metaphorical axis "across the space of language" to another level of thinking and then stopping, merely "showing" us what is revealed here without attempting to (syntagmatically) "narrate" it.

Lyotard's Postmodern Fable

By way of returning to the point where we started, Dick's "realistic" vision of our planet's future seen now as a "figurative thinking of the event," let us turn to Lyotard's "A Postmodern Fable" in the late work *Postmodern Fables* (*Moralités postmodernes*).[15] "A Postmodern Fable" is told in an extremely detached and objective style and tone. It is a story about our own remote future told from the perspective of an even more remote future, and the focus throughout is on astrophysics, biology, chaos/complexity theory and the human/non-human interface. The fable's extremely "abstracted" or encompassing point of view, which reduces the "meaning" of human reality on earth in the early twenty-first century to virtually "zero," might be seen as the becoming-event of narrative, that is, (the) narrative's future transformation into the "figure"—or as a spatializing, a flattening-out or stretching-out (literally "ab-straction") of time. The Fable's prediction is that the "human" race (and later earth itself) will inevitably perish at some contingent point in the future, just as life on the planet contingently came into being at some point long ago from a mixture of sunlight with the chemicals in seawater—but also that before earth is destroyed humans will try to transform themselves into another (ambiguously trans-human) "form" which will be able to leave the planet just in

[15] In his one-page Preface, Lyotard says that these days "Morals often contradict each other. [...] Today, life is fast. It vaporizes morals. Futility suits the postmodern, for words as well as things. [...] *The moral of all morals would be that of "aesthetic" pleasure.* Here, then, are fifteen notes on postmodern aestheticization. And against it!" (vii; my emphasis).

time.

Here Lyotard places (in postmodernist fashion) a tale-within-a-tale, fable-within-a-fable.[16] This embedded fable is preceded and followed by a few pages of commentary by the meta-author (Lyotard), thus allowing for a degree of circularity and repetition, for meta-temporal levels of narrative framing (techniques common to the most traditional folk stories and fables). "The Postmodern Fable" itself begins (before the fable proper has begun): "What a Human and his/her Brain—or rather the Brain and its Human—would resemble at the moment when they leave the planet forever, before its destruction; that, the story does not say. So ends the fable we are about to hear" (84).[17] The meta-narrator, then, Lyotard or his "speaker,"

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[16] The embedded fable (or *fable propre*) begins and ends like this:

> In the immensity of the cosmos, it happened that the energy distributed by chance into particles regrouped here and there into bodies. These bodies constituted isolated systems, galaxies, stars. They disposed of a finite quantity of energy. They used this energy to maintain themselves as stable systems. [...] But deprived of assignable energy, these systems were doomed to disappear in time. Energy came to be lacking [... and it] disorganized, returned to [...] chaos [...].
>
> In a minute part of the cosmic immensity [... and] there was one star, called the Sun. Like all the closed systems, the star emitted heat, light [and its] life expectancy was limited by entropy. At the time this fable was told, the Sun had more or less reached the midpoint of its life. It still had four and a half billion years before it would disappear. (85)
>
> [...]
>
> In the long run, the open systems won out completely over all the other systems (human, organic, and physical) locked in struggle on the surface of the planet Earth. Nothing appeared able to stop, or even guide, their development. [...] Only the ineluctable disappearance of the entire solar system seemed like it ought to check the pursuit of development. In response to this challenge, the system already (at the time the fable was told) had begun to develop prostheses able to perpetuate it after the disappearance of the energy resources of solar origin that had contributed to the appearance and survival of living and, in particular, human systems.
>
> At the time this story was told, all research in progress was directed to this aim [...]. All of this research turns out, in fact, to be dedicated [...] to testing and remodeling the so-called human body, or to replacing it, in such a way that the brain remains able to function with the aid only of the energy resources available in the cosmos. And so was prepared the final exodus of the negentropic system far from the Earth.
>
> What a Human and his/her Brain—or rather the Brain and its Human—would resemble at the moment when they leave the planet forever, before its destruction; that, the story does not say. (90-91)

[17] Here it continues:

> The Sun is going to explode. The entire solar system, including the little planet Earth, will be transformed into a giant nova. Four and a half billion solar years have elapsed since the time this fable was told. The end of history has already been

poses or posits himself in the very remote future, "four and a half billion solar years [... after ...] this fable was told." Surprisingly, however, it seems that the "great destruction" predicted (more or less "realistically") by the fable proper has not yet occurred—though we are not totally sure of this, given the speaker's various "uncertainties" and also Lyotard's "cross-over" play with verb tense, further reinforcing yet also rendering slightly ambiguous the (spatial) "solidity" of the temporal-frame structure. Thus we don't know if the "predicted" trans-human escape-from-earth at the time of planetary destruction (and one would think the probability of ultimate escape is actually very low) will ever really occur: "something ought to escape [...]." Nor do we know who or what this "subject" is, the one who may escape but also, perhaps, the "author": this future trans-human "figure," the "Human and his/her Brain" or "Brain and its Human."

The author/speaker foregrounds these uncertainties in his/her/its final two sentences, even if the immediate reference of the "uncertainty" is the status of the "ought": "And, finally, how are we to understand the 'ought to escape'? Is it a need, an obligation, an eventuality? This uncertainty is no less realistic than the prediction of its coming to pass." We know the prediction itself was real, but the mathematical sense of "prediction" means that what is predicted is also uncertain, that indeed the figure (or event) of this uncertainty is just as "real" as the (figure or) event of the prediction. We sense that we may have entered here unknowingly into the opacity of Lyotard's spatio-temporal-"logical" figure/event complex. This undecidability of the fable's temporal or metanarrative "framing" (frame as design or figure but also as event or narrative praxis)—suggesting again the instability of all metalanguages insofar as they are inevitability embedded within further metalanguages, that is, within narrativity—is crucial to Lyotard's broader "project" here, especially given the parody of Hegelian-Marxist teleological grand narratives: "The end of history has already been foreseen since that time." Adding to the temporal ambiguities—playful yet very serious—is the undecidability of the "since" in "since that time."

> foreseen since that time. Is this truly a fable? The lifetime of a star can be determined scientifically. [...] So it is with that star called the Sun. The narrative of the end of the Earth is not in itself fictional, it's really rather realistic. What the final words of this story cause us to ponder is not that the Earth will disappear with the Sun, but that something ought to escape the conflagration of the system and its ashes. And it's also that the fable hesitates to name the thing that ought to survive: is it the Human and his/her Brain, or the Brain and its Human? And, finally, how are we to understand the "ought to escape"? Is it a need, an obligation, an eventuality [*éventualité*; possibility, choice]? This uncertainty is no less realistic than the prediction of its coming to pass. (84)

We assume "that time" is the time "when this fable was told," the speaker's distant past, our own distant future; and perhaps we wonder by the way if this fable is not in its own (more deconstructive or "figurative" way) also "predicting" the "end of history" (as well as of this *histoire*, "story"). The "since" opens up a wide range (*é ventail*), "fan" or "tensor" of choices, extending from the time of telling story 1 (original fable or *petit récit*), perhaps, to that of the now-ongoing telling of story 2, *this* story, which still cannot say whether the "end(s)" predicted in/by story 1 will actually ever be reached.

It seems our "present" story-teller may indeed be *suspended* within that span, between the time the end of the world was predicted and some indeterminate future when (partly depending on how "world" is defined) this end may in fact occur. This figure of suspension then plays against the figure of an absolute end of time/history (Christian/Hegelian apocalypse, totality, the Hegelian "absolute limit") but also against that which comes *after* the "end of history"—or is the latter also "figured as" the suspension-within?[18] The question then becomes: is the undecidability of the before-end, caught in the *éventail*, range or span of a suspension, "equivalent" to that of the after-end? Also, which is the "event": the actual "end" (that unthinkable rupture and break, that unrepresentable, apocalyptic conflagration) or the/its suspensions before-and-after, which after all are also, in their own way, "incommensurable"?

In his final commentary in "A Postmodern Fable," that which comes *after* the framed fable proper, Lyotard/the speaker claims that the history (*histoire*) recounted by this narrative offers "none of the principal traits of historicity." For one thing this is a purely "*physical history* [...] concerned only with energy and matter as a state of energy. *Humankind is taken for a complex material system; consciousness, for an effect of language; and language, for a highly complex material system.*" A corollary of this is the fact that the time of the fable is primarily *diachronic clock-time*, "not a temporality of consciousness that requires the past and the future, in their absence, to be nonetheless held as present [...]. The fable admits such a temporality only for the systems endowed with symbolic language, which in effect allow memorization and anticipation [...]." As for the events ("it happened that…") that punctuate the fabulous *history of energy*, the latter "neither awaits nor retains

[18] This suggests various poststructuralist open economies, including that of Bataille, who wants to move "in excess" of Hegel's limit or end-point—as discussed in Derrida's essay ("From Restricted and General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve" in *Writing and Difference*) on open and closed economies. Bataille's "general economy of waste" is also suggestive in the light of Dick's increasingly kipple-filled earth.

them." Furthermore, "the end of this history is in no way directed toward the horizon of an emancipation." The "being" to be rescued from earth is "a very differentiated system, a kind of super-brain" which "necessarily possesses a symbolic language of some sort" and thus also has some "sentiment of a finality"; nonetheless, "rather than a hermeneutic circle, the fable presents this effect as the result of a cybernetic loop regulated toward growth." Finally, the future recounted by this fable is "for us today [...] not an object of hope." For "hope is what belongs to a subject of history who promises him/herself—or to whom has been promised—a final perfection." However:

> The postmodern fable tells something completely different. The Human, or his/her brain, is a [matter-energy] formation [...] necessarily transitory since it is dependent on the conditions of terrestrial life, which are not eternal. The formation called Human or Brain will have been nothing more than an episode in the conflict between differentiation and entropy. The pursuit of greater complexity asks not for the perfecting of the Human, but its mutation or its defeat for the benefit of a better performing system. [... This] fable does not present the traits of a modern "great narrative." It does not respond to the demand for remission or emancipation. For lack of an eschatology, the conjugated mechanicalness and contingency of the story it tells leave thought suffering for lack of finality. This suffering is the postmodern state of thought, which is by agreement called in these times its crisis, its malaise, or its melancholia. (Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables* 98-100).

Again it seems to me that insofar as it attempts to totally or exhaustively narrate, as theoretical discourse, an emerging "global present"—which far from being a radical rupture of the temporal-historical axis is an inescapably Hegelian *Zeitgeist*-present locatable on just such a linear, horizontal axis—our current globalizing-globalization theory itself becomes another grand narrative. What Lyotard opposes to it is a plurality of *petits récits* which, like this postmodern fable itself, jump metaphorically or paralogically to a level fully outside or beyond the "syntagmatic discourse of the present" rather than "telling a story that has meaning" in our accustomed sense. Of course, in this case Lyotard is arguably writing a "*petit récit* of *petits récits*" (rather than a "grand narrative of *petits récits*"), for he has foregrounded, if only by way of subverting or parodying it, the sort of theoretical (Christian-Hegelian-Marxist "end of history") discourse that in fact determines the

nature of what "little narratives" do—namely, to "get outside" all theoretical discourse.

One *could* perhaps argue that here, nonetheless, the physical-science discourse of chaos/complexity theory, open-and-closed systems and entropic-decay-into-disorder has replaced the Hegelian-Christian teleological discourse as a sort of "grand narrative" which still determines, grounds, encompasses the *histoire*. However, again we must note that chaos/complexity theory describes systems either expanding endlessly toward (yet never actually reaching) a hypothetical state of total entropic disorder (absolute suspension in terminal equilibrium), or expanding-and-contracting (self-ordering/self-disordering/self-ordering) in an endless cycle (another form of absolute suspension). Furthermore, Lyotard's physical-science and indeed cosmic setting here foregrounds, in relativistic fashion, the infinitesimally small "meaning" or "value" of all theoretical human-historical *Zeitgeist*-narrations (including early-twenty-first-century ones). That is, the move toward extra-terrestrial space and extra-human (or trans-human) future time is itself a more extreme or paradigmatic form, an example "on a larger scale," of the paralogical-metaphorical "leap" that art must make in the face of linear-syntagmatic, *present*- and indeed *human*-grounded theoretical discourse. This fable is a form of *petit récit* that can more graphically demonstrate the ease with which art, through its paralogical-"paraphysical" condensations and displacements, inevitably "engulfs" theory.[19]

But let us reflect a bit more on this "conjugated mechanicalness and contingency of the story it tells" which "leave thought suffering for lack of finality. This suffering is the postmodern state of thought [...]." "Conjugated" means "connected" or (in some sense) "syntagmatic," but Lyotard's point here is that from a non-human (trans-human) point of view, i.e., viewed absolutely "objectively" as a stone or machine might view it, this on-going ("tick-tock") syntagmatism or syntax of time is no longer a syntax that has (human) "meaning"; in a sense then, "mechanically" viewed, the horizontal syntactic or metonymic flow of time would be hard to distinguish from the "disconnection" of metaphor on the vertical axis. Is

[19] See note 14 for a "qualification" of this use of "displacement," and the opening discussion of Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*? In perhaps more concrete terms, Virginia Woolf's "experimental" story "Kew Gardens" (1943) demonstrates that *art is really physics*. "Kew Gardens" is a *narrative-as-physics-experiment*: the central point of view belongs to a snail, who overhears fragments of human conversations (as if it were a microphone-with-tape-recorder hidden in the middle of a park); at the story's end we get a ghostly blending (from, we assume, the omniscient human narrator's rather than snail's point of view) of remote past and future with the present. Woolf has emphasized the impact on her of British empirical philosophy.

the time that combines metaphor/metonym in this way then to be the "melancholic-suspended" time of postmodern thought? If so, then perhaps we could see the function of grand/globalizing narratives or discourses as being above all to "overcome" this indefinite suspension of thought (thus its suffering and postmodern "melancholia") through a syntagmatic directedness-toward-future (which means toward-end), an explanation of the "total meaning" which gives us all some common "purpose." If, on the other hand, through its metaphoric-paralogical force Lyotard's postmodern art of the *petits récits* "enacts the event," that is, the condensation and displacement of time (and history) itself, how could this be simply a matter of embodying (in artistic form) that postmodern "melancholic suspension of thought" which opposes itself to the (modernist) grand narrative of history? Perhaps we could more easily see this melancholic suspension (which has "no end in sight") as that which underlies both art and theory, just as "postmodernism [...] is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 79). But if postmodern art and discursive theory are both (in a certain sense modernist) "expressions" of the underlying nascent state, it is nonetheless the displacement of art which is more truly "inventive," more radically original, creative, disruptive and (therefore) transformative.

Perhaps too we might "figure" the indefinitely on-going, suspended and thus senseless metonymic syntax of this melancholic "postmodern state of thought" as

> the substitution not metaphorically, but in terms of the interminable metonymy [...] of exchange; then it is no longer signification (what is encoded) which the sign substitutes, for [now] *signification itself is also only made of signs*, *and goes on forever*, so we never get anything but cross-references, signification is always deferred, and meaning is never present [...]" (Lyotard in "The Tensor"; qtd. in Andrew Benjamin 1-2).

This "never getting anything but cross-references" suggests hypertext, a constitutive capacity of cyberspace; in "The Tensor" Lyotard indeed is speaking of the "annihilation of material" (as in a dream) such that we are left only with "a message."[20]

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[20] Lyotard here quotes Adorno on Schoenberg:

> [T]he material [...] in serialism no longer has a value as such, but only as a relation or link between one term and another. And in Boulez we no longer have anything but relation, not only in pitch, but also in stress, timbre, and duration. Dematerialization. [... Yet isn't this] at the same time and within the same space, the

The dematerialization here even of meaning as it operates or emerges in the open-and-closed economy of the psyche may after all fit the picture of thought's indefinite suspension in "diachronic clock-time." But Lyotard, even when speaking of the irrational *force* of the Freudian dream-work and thus too (at least potentially) of artistic production, of "performing the incommensurable event" through art, seems to reduce this creative force to the relative difference or displacement of markings on (two or more) (proto-) linguistic surfaces.

Deleuze's "Stuttering of *Langue*"

Deleuze gives us a more clearly force-based (i.e., Nietzschean) model of *literary* creativity which is still centered in the structure of *langue*. Indeed, "conjugation" in its sense of "conjugating the tense of verbs" also suggests Deleuze's anthropological notion of the "infinitive verb" in *The Logic of Sense* (181-85, 194, 248-49). Here he speculates that human language, after having evolved from "inner bodily noise" through "voice" to "speech," is projected onto the "metaphysical surface" (of the body, of mouth/mind/thinking) as the "infinitive verb." This verb ("to go," "to see," "to __") has the sense of a virtually infinite range (*éventail*) of meanings (or "substitutions") within *langue*, for the subject as well as object of the verb can be varied indefinitely. Thus "The Verb is the univocity of language, in the form of an undetermined infinitive [...]. It is poetry itself. As it expresses in language all events in one, *the infinitive verb expresses the event of language—language being a unique event* [...]" (185; my emphasis). Deleuze foregrounds Mallarmé (whose "fan" or *éventail*, "range of choices" we have just alluded to) in the first chapter of *Nietzsche's Philosophy*, where he formulates an interpretation of Nietzsche's eternal return as a "repetition of the dice-throw," that is, as the explosion of random possibilities at any given moment now repeated in each successive moment: "To think is to send out a dicethrow" (*Logic* 32-33). This interpretation of the future in terms of the explosive fragmentations of "sky-chance" is

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> cartography of a *material* voyage, of new regions in the space of sound, but equally of chromaticism, sculpture, politics, eroticism and language, which thanks to the sign-representation are conquered and crossed by the paths of impulses, offering the libido new opportunities to intensify itself, while the fabrication of signs by "dematerialization" causes an extension of the tensors. (Andrew Benjamin 2)

further developed in *Difference and Repetition*. And in the late essay "He Stuttered" Deleuze speaks of Beckett's exhaustive play (in *Watt*) with "logical disjunctions," that is, with "all logical possibilities" as a means of bringing us to the limit(s) of *langue* (110-13). But Deleuze more obviously than Lyotard sees *langue* itself, the total system of language, as a kind of monstrous "living thing," perhaps not quite an "organism" but a dynamic "body without organs."[21]

While this "syntactic limit" that is not "outside of" language but rather is its "outer surface" may recall Lyotard's discontinuous, vertical-metaphorical, para-logical leaps "within" *langue*, Deleuze's model is at once more geometrical, physical and openly "poetic"—that is, the "theoretical discourse" has itself been more radically "poetized" (metaphorized) here than generally happens in Lyotard. In suggesting an approach to "literature" which is more manifestly "physical" than Lyotard's, Deleuze perhaps gives us a wider perspective on the turn-to-physics of the "Postmodern Fable" as well, whose "suspension in thought" is after all a (trans-human) waiting for the explosion that will destroy the earth. But given the prosaic style of this fable, it would be difficult to go so far as to read its subversive force as the bio-geophysical force of internal vibrations within this monstrous (and now virtually cosmic) *langue*, Deleuzian vibrations or disruptions which can all too easily annihilate, like seismic ruptures of the earth itself and the tsunami waves they generate, the puny "all-too-human" limitations of (e.g., *circa* early twenty-first-

[21] According to Deleuze,

> The linguist Guillaume [...] considers each term of a language not as a constant in relation to other constants, but as a series of differential positions or points of view on a specifiable dynamism: the indefinite article *a* covers the entire zone of variation included in a movement of particularization, and the definite article *the* covers the entire zone generated by the movement of generalization. It is a stuttering, with every position of *a* or *the* constituting a zone of vibration. Language trembles from head to toe. This is the principle of a poetic comprehension of language itself: it is as if the language were stretched along an abstract and infinitely varied line. [...] Beckett's procedure [...] is as follows: he places himself in the middle of the sentence and makes the sentence grow out from the middle, adding particle upon particle [...] so as to pilot the block of a single expiring breath [...]. Creative stuttering is what makes language grow from the middle, like grass; it is what makes language a rhizome instead of a tree, what puts language in perpetual disequilibrium [...]. The two aspects are nonetheless correlative: the tensor and the limit, the tension in language and the limit of language. The two aspects are effected in an infinity of tonalities, but always together: a limit of language that subtends the entire language, and a line of variation or subtended modulation that brings language to this limit. And just as the new language is not external to the initial language, the asyntactic limit is not external to language as a whole: it is *the outside* of language, but is not outside it. ("He Stuttered" 108-12)

century A.D.) grand narratives or theoretical discourses.

Such purely "bio-geophysical" interpretations, since here we are speaking of a "poetic understanding of language itself," fit modern poetry much more easily, and especially verse which (like Deleuze's "theoretical" riffs on "the quivering of language in all its limbs") points back (metaphorically or metonymically, synecdochally) at the displaced and incommensurable space or spatiality of its own "quivering form." For instance, Mallarmé's "But if my stroke liberates [...] / through a profound shock, / this frigidity will melt / into the laughter of a drunken blossoming / To cast the sky in fragments [...]"; or his "Vertigo! Behold space shivering / like a vast kiss / which, driven mad by coming to birth for no one, / can neither gush forth nor calm itself."

Yet this figure would need to be crossed with Nietzsche's:

> What did we do when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? [...] Away from all suns? [...] Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? [...] There has never been a greater deed; and whoever will be born after us [...] will be part of a higher history than all history hitherto. [...] This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering—it has not yet reached the ears of man. [...] This deed is still more distant from them than the most distant stars—*and yet they have done it themselves*. (*Gay Science* 3.125; qtd. in Kaufmann 95-96; Nietzsche's emphasis)[22]

[22] Is the "Zarathustrian" speaker's post-God "higher history" ironic—is he mocking Hegelian and Christian-apocalyptic notions of the "end of history" (and "Second Coming")—or is this meant rather to suggest a discontinuous history, one spatially "displaced" or "discontinuously crossed" as if by the Lyotardian figure/event, so that we have precisely no end-point (no grand narrative)? In any event it is hard to pin down the precise relation between Nietzsche's "figure" and Walter Benjamin's in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "[A fact] became historical posthumously […] through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he […] establishes a conception of the present as the 'time of the now' which is shot through with chips of Messianic time" (263). The point is that Benjamin's "Messianic-time" can hardly be reduced to the traditional Christian "apocalyptic" or "eschatological" time: "This does not imply […] that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter" (264; we note the contingency of this "might"). Nietzsche's unchained earth flying "away from all suns" somehow also calls to mind Benjamin's famous figure of the "angel of history" (based on Klee's "Angelus Novus"): "His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. […] But a storm is blowing from paradise [and] irresistibly propels him into the future to

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which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress" (257-58). The "pile of debris growing skyward" suggests, in turn, Dick's post-nuclear-war earth steadily filling with kipple (and radioactive dust), but here there is no mournful angel looking back at what has happened; rather, it is most of the surviving humans who have (perhaps like the angel appalled) fled from earth to Mars. The sense in which this "storm" might be a sign of (continuous) "progress" is (as for Benjamin) ambiguous at best. Benjamin's backward-looking angel also calls to mind Lyotard's (Blanchot-influenced) mythic figure of Orpheus looking back at Eurydice at the gates of hell and thus losing her: "By trying to see Eurydice, he loses all hope of making her be seen; the *figure is that which has no face*; it kills the one that looks at it because it fills him with its own night. […] It was for the sake of this backward look that Orpheus went to fetch Eurydice" (Lyotard, *Toward the Postmodern* 5-6; my emphasis).

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