

Nothing Like Maudlin [draft]

But to resist is in itself a metamorphosis

As if a quasi poetic fact affirmed itself

In and of nothing

With the indubitable certainty that this nothing

The humiliated

Exists.

(CS, 67 [modified])

Resistance and significance

Jean-François Lyotard's last two works, Chambre sourde [CS] and La Confession d'Augustin [CA], add to the significance of his work as perhaps the most searing, but also most subtle form of resistance in recent philosophy. *Except it is nothing like organised resistance and significance is a betrayal.* The effect of the books is closer to a sudden squall than to a plod against a prevailing wind. They do not enlist us into a good fight against some tangible enemy. Not since his writings on Algeria, and maybe not even there, has he sought to go head to head with some eliminable foe, as if the fight could be won. That kind of philosophical naivety serves only to re-enforce

what he calls deathly eternal repetition, *l'éternelle redite*. The secret, his secret, is to continue to live intensely, hidden in the choking glue and re-used debris that give consistency to our necessary commonwealths. He leaves the refinement of the visible structure to other thinkers. Free of the now banal and always paranoid - power-crazed - concern to define and justify their activity as philosophy, Lyotard's last books refine the practice of dissimulation, the art of secret loves and invisible passions from Libidinal Economy. They do so through the study of material vibration: 'An immaterialist materialism, if it is true that matter is energy and mind, is contained vibration' (Lyotard 1988, 45). This essay is an attempt to explicate the capacity of resistance in vibration a little further. *And yes, its most likely flaw is bad faith...*

This explication cannot be about significance. It is neither a matter of certainty regarding the meaning and truth of the texts, nor of their importance. The former would place them in the realm of what Lyotard calls the cognitive. Admittedly, a definition that has come under attack through his career, for example, in Alain Badiou's remarks on the distinction to be drawn between the cognitive defined in legal terms, or in line with the natural sciences, and the cognitive defined in mathematical terms. In 'Custos Quid Noctis?' his critical reading of The Differend, Badiou argues that Lyotard fails to appreciate the grounding significance of the mathematics:

Mathematical sentences – and in my opinion all sentences the stake of which is truth – falsify [Lyotard's] definition of the cognitive. The fact that there "is" mathematical thought is not governed by any procedure for the establishment

of a real referent [...] Lyotard's epistemology remains critical (juridical) [...]

It is not directed according to the right paradigm. (861)

For Badiou, the cognitive defined according to a model of evidence may well fall prey to doubts regarding the possibility of presenting satisfactory evidence in all just cases. It may also be prone to doubts regarding the possibility of finding rules for the admissibility of evidence that are fair to the grievances of all sides of a dispute. But this is not the case for the mathematical, where theorems that hold in all other realms can be deduced without error or injustice. This does not necessarily lead to a strong determination of those realms; the laws that follow are often very thin in terms of how they determine the realms, as evinced in Badiou's use of set theory in his own work (See, L'Être et l'événement).

But Chambre sourde and La Confession d'Augustin demand to be read as works of art and philosophy. They rebel against both definitions of the cognitive (as do all of Lyotard's works), neither subject to rules of evidence nor mathematical intuition and proof. They combine aesthetic density and ellipsis to frustrate the willing of identity. To reduce the books to clear definitions and propositions is as fruitless as searching for well-defined limits and identities in the post-symbolist and post-realist abstractions of modern art so important in the development of Lyotard's thought: 'The avant-gardist attempt inscribes the occurrence of a sensory now as what cannot be presented and which remains to be presented in the decline of great representational painting.' (Lyotard 1988, 103) The same holds true for the will to bring under law or ascribe to precise aesthetic categories. Lyotard's sensual books cannot be explained by reference to a shareable mode of production, aesthetic criterion or experience.

They flush out the crushing absurdity of the search for an algorithm or a dialectic for the development of great philosophy, modern art and art-works: 'What you demand of us, theoreticians, is that we constitute ourselves as identities, and responsible ones at that! But if we are sure of anything, it is that this operation (of exclusion) is a sham, that no one produces incandescences and that they belong to no-one, that they have effects but not causes.' (Lyotard 1993a, 258) Or, in the words of the later Lyotard: 'On the contrary, it is important that a reflexive writing persist in questioning its own property, between poem and matheme, as Alain Badiou would say, or rather in the weft of the one and the other, and that thereby it endlessly expropriate itself.' (Lyotard 1993b, 209)

The challenge, or rather the selection, since some will find no way in and the others will not have chosen to be implicated, is to find a way of following on after what the books do to you, to your *me* and to your *I*. They violate. Not in the secondary manner of theoretical books, too discrete to mention the practical categorical selections their programmes prepare for and lust after. But with extreme yet subtle directness, like a confused then horrifying image: at first benign and curious, then inerasable. Lyotard does not promise a pure relief upon leaving his works, as if he could free us of having to live with the terror of fixed truths and their exclusive laws or with pain and suffering. Pure relief is just more and worse pain later, even when it defines the good and the true asymptotically: '... neither theoretical construction, nor *deconstruction* will ensure the possession of intensities.' (Lyotard 1993a, 257). Chambre sourde and La Confession D'Augustin refuse even paradoxical ends. Instead, they infuse a catalyst, not an intimation to consciousness of violence to come, but its fissuring at

the end of a slow reaction: 'You, the Other, pure word in act, life without remains, you stay mute. Upon meeting you, the I explodes, without trace.' (CA, 56)

So the introduction of judgements of value on the pretext of art would be wrong too (*Not only here*). It is not a question of that kind of significance either. It is too late to judge: the work has selected you. If judgement still seems possible, it is because the selection was illusory or because the terrible illusion of judgment remains (*Bury that sensation quickly, in a shallow category, perhaps no one has noticed...*). Outside the possibilities of pretence and repression, the task of following on after the disasters that Lyotard has prepared for us cannot be a matter of mere judgement, in the same way as it cannot be a matter of mere understanding. It is a practical matter, where judgement and understanding have a role to play, but never the sole or even the leading one. Understanding is essential if we are to chart the structures within which material effects are unleashed. Judgement has to come into play in avoiding errors that are already known to us, or in repeating those errors in circumstances that may transform them. There is a skill involved in living with his dark books so that they do not plunge the reader into a mesmerised silence:

Only the extreme instants of horror have universal value

And then only occasionally

Gods may die

And humanism

Agony is immortal.

(CS, 104 [modified])

But skill is not enough on its own: it can only serve to refine, since understanding and judgement cannot provide the intense material they then have to work with. Their proper material is a projection outwards of the subject and self that they presuppose. So the world comes to mirror the ordered inner worlds and logical structures of the self and the subject. But those are the very things within which another matter is being worked to undo them. Lyotard's matter, vibration, often lies dormant and sometimes erupts in the oppositions that define the structures; they are cracks rather than clean breaks. It is futile, repressive again, to attempt to shore them up against the process in a reflexive strengthening, since the disaster comes from within: as structure gains in solidity, so does the devastating effect of tremors. The 'key', then, is to find out how to vibrate with movements that are already set deep in us. It is a local problem. But even that locality cannot be known or charted in terms of qualitative judgments, since this also would be a return to a false fixity and to the priority of understanding and judgement. Instead, oblique essays are called for: an art of trial and error that refuses to set its sights with any certainty and that eschews all promises. This is an active passivity, where precise actions serve an imprecise and perhaps volatile risk-taking with bundles of ideas and sensations, where precise actions work against their natural tendency to solidify skill and sensitivity into law:

So you see how there is *passivity*: we have neither to judge causes nor isolate effects, energies pass through us and we have to suffer them, we produce a philosophy of sodomists and women, come what may provided you do what you must ... let everything go, become conductors of hot and cold, or sweet and sour, the dull and the shrill, theorems and screams, let it make its way over

you, without ever *knowing* whether it will work or not, whether it will result in an unheard of, unseen, untested, unthought, unexperienced, effect, or not.

(Lyotard 1993a, 259)

Good nihilism

In Chambre sourde and La Confession d'Augustin, Lyotard sets his sights on a Cartesian and Augustinian legacy. As ever, the stakes are political, in the sense of a struggle for a life amongst others that does not fall prey to the apparent necessities of life in common. The legacy is two-fold, covering the methods that thought has to adopt and the type of actors that thought presupposes. Thought, or creation, are set on a nihilistic downward spiral after Descartes and Augustine (*not in them!*), because the patterns and disciplines that are imposed exclude what is most precious to life, and because thinkers become detached from what they create, fixed points bereft of passions and loves. Resisting this spiral, Lyotard exploits the paradoxical capacity of nihilism to lead to a rebound. Nihilism, the complex of affects, ideas and structures that strangles life, plays the dual role of positive and negative motor, of constructive and destructive force. Nihilism strangles life, but also energises it.

Lyotard's passions, his senses of cornered urgency and loathing that drive the writing against modernity, are his negative motor. They emerge out of a destructive nihilism defined by the tension of three forces: i. the affect of pessimism (the absence

of the capacity to project brightness in the future, caused by the return of past failures in the present); ii. the stifling drive to shore up of the structures of self (mythical communities, the consolation of auto-biography, even humanism); iii. the profoundly negative hopeful ideas of modernity (even the positive ends of modernity are the negation of primary energies): 'Parties do not win wars, war does, the old beast that asphyxiates all questioning and that unleashes the avidity to believe and to adhere to that which tries to rise. You cannot camp out in vileness without sticking to it.' (CS, 76) When combined these forces appear to corner Lyotard in a void of will and identity, in an incapacity to drive himself forward and to create. Subjects and communities require hope to drive themselves forward and out of their tendency to stasis and pessimism, but hope is constitutively negative, since it depends on assigning a lack to our present condition, a lack that can never be finally shaken off, so we fall back into pessimism.

His loves, his constructive affects, have a similar tense genealogy. Knowingly unromantic, he will have nothing to do with fixed stares and distant sighs, preferring tender and violent immersion – precision: 'No, the catastrophe that comes forth with May's confession is that her throat becomes unsoldered from his. Breaking their absolute separation, shared right up to that instant.' (CS, 95) Love is generated by: i. the affect of hypersensitivity (where judgement and understanding are both disengaged); ii. by a desire for an aesthetic consistency (in consistent localities – *a life* - and between consistencies - *lives and their others*); iii. by the pliable, conducting and minimal structure of style. Together, these forces allow matter to work through us in our creations. Hypersensitivities allow for first contact to be made with matter, to sensual events, without slowing them down and distorting them in knowledge grids

and judgement hierarchies. The events harmonise thanks to consistency and thereby amplify as they come in and out of phase. Style makes it possible for sensual events to drift in and out of objective time, whilst playing a tight game of dependency and flight with the structures needed to capture those events. The sensual and emotional anaesthesia that overcomes language is undone by style: 'Augustine's stilus, in order to accord with vibrant inconsistency, bends to the timbres, the assonances, the rhythm of the poem. Out of the farthest Near East, come from there to us, to Rimbaud, by way of the courtly *canto*, the antique figure of the erotic blaze is offered to words so that they may confess saintly copulation.' (CA, 23)

But, for Lyotard, there is no love that does not come out of passion and no passion that does not come out of love. Hence the counter-intuitive description of loves in terms of constructive nihilism: the two nihilisms must run parallel to one another. The complex of hypersensitivity, created consistency and style has a tendency to decline into a self-negating solidity: a saddened consciousness of sensitivity, the sublimation of consistency into identity and the distillation of style into the false security of rule and law (pessimism, subjectivity and hope). This tendency must not be explained in terms of a necessary antagonistic reference point external to the complex (consciousness or community), it is an immanent property of an inner play driven by growth. Consciousness and community are inherent to the drive for consistency in its positive relation to hypersensitivity and style. The complex of love brings together contradictory elements that also complement one-another. This would be self-sufficient if even a relative stability could be attained. But the complex is inherently unstable, because the demand for greater consistency becomes a demand for identity

and because, then, the demand for greater conductivity in style leads to call for the organisation afforded by rules.

So Lyotard's reading of Augustine turns partly on the observation that, in confession, the attempt to capture and then elevate sensations into the love of God risks betraying that which allows for the rise: 'Like the stomach that in digesting them eliminates the succulence dishes had in the mouth, conscious memory would at best only retain of the encounter an expurgated version of the formidable emotion that metamorphoses flesh and soul.' (CA, 55) For Lyotard, the drive to God is fleshly and a matter of consciousness, there is no pure intellectual love of God and there is no lasting fleshly encounter. Hence the importance of style, the third corner, that allows for a fragile articulation of the other two. The horror of logical readings (*followings on*) is made plain by this thesis, but more so by Lyotard's soaring late style. Each sentence of his posthumous book is attentive to the sensual potential of syntax, semantics and dramatisation in a way unmatched by any contemporary. The rhythm of the sentences has an animal feel to it, like watching apparently contingent shifts from rest, to taught alert, to rapid flight; a movement that expresses hypersensitivity, fleshly animation and flows of sexual desire. The dominant genre of philosophical questions, half-answers and intricate distinctions is enriched by a counterpoint with sensual descriptions and incongruous erotic adjectives and verbs. Lyotard's well-known dramatisation (*Elle...; Lui...*), a critical development of the historical form of the dialogue, is developed further and rendered imperceptible to the point where his earlier play on the identity of the parties in the dialogue is increased and at the same time made much less self-conscious and staged. Which voice is Augustine, which one Lyotard, which one your own inner voice provoked by him? When is the addressee

God, when the body, when the reader? The thesis on style is folded back into style, *not to avoid `contradictions`*, but to re-enforce its impact through the consistency of the text:

The conversion is the flaw in the grain of the confession, it is in no way the substitution of an amended version, luminous to the blind version and poor in profane life. For the confessor there will no longer be a night and a day, but henceforth-flawed day, flawed night. And it is in the minute interstice of the crack that the *stilus* styles itself, in the reciprocal overhang of enigma and manifestation. (CA 73)

Nihilism is another word for this necessary reciprocal overhang: the destructive side of nihilism is the zeroing of the constructive side as it collapses back onto itself. But because it is a zeroing, the negative side also allows for new hypersensitivities, burgeoning consistencies and new styles to emerge in the void of stifling structures, *to the point where the use of positive and negative in nihilism becomes a trap*. Love, `positive` nihilism, tends to destroy itself and this is what makes life possible, in the sense of eternal and forgetful cycles of intense occurrences within structures. The failure by repetition in nihilism plays on both of its sides: `Nihilism is certainly a motif of lamentations: the end of everything is the subject of endless discourse, beginning with art.` (CS, 64) But this allows both sides to begin new and necessarily doomed cycles without being haunted by the memory of prior failures and attempts: `Yet it is a blessed desert too: in the void of meaning, literature and the arts try harder than ever to work materials into art. In the certainty that these stupefy, have always

stupefied by keeping no secrets back from investigation, by putting nothing up against it.' This explains why Lyotard develops his definition of matter as vibration, it trembles on the line between the fall into nihilistic repetition in structure and the spring out of nothingness: 'Form, or what takes its place, since it becomes a question, hides and suggests what lies beyond all answers, silence, being zero. So the work is *there*, fact that stays invulnerable to repetition, to the reiteration of motifs.' (CS, 64)

This *there* is an improvement on Lyotard's earlier sublime *there* or *arrive-t-il?*, from The Inhuman in particular. This is because the last work returns to the democratic appeal, in the sense of lack of restriction and hierarchy, of Lyotard's much earlier libidinal intensities. The Kantian antecedents of the sublime impose limits on the type and relation of the feelings and realms that accompany a sublime event, thereby limiting the range of events, not necessarily in terms of scale or kind, but in terms of context. On Lyotard's reading, the sublime depends on a well mapped out sensual division into opposing pairs and on a structural (or intellectual) division into realms and on the positing of an ungraspable field beyond those realms. Or, in terms of Lyotard's reading of Kant in L'Enthousiasme, the realms are the islands of an archipelago kept apart by stretches of water that cannot be bridged legitimately. There is an advantage in this reading, insofar as it allows Lyotard to detect absolute differences between realms (differends). But the downside is that an illegitimate grid is imposed on matter in the form of the three divisions and the demand that they be well-defined in terms of a deduction of: either, the internal regulation that determines legitimacy within a realm and hence its limits; or, the rational extension that extends a concept to become an Idea of reason. Strictly, the feeling of the sublime cannot occur if such deductions are not possible, despite the fact that Lyotard moves from this strict

Kantian cogency back to a more libidinal definition of matter through L'Infini and later texts.

Once the lessons learnt from Kant have been happily half-forgotten, the insight of the later philosophy is that events are not necessarily limited to well-defined realms. So long as vibration is triggered in a given structure that is utterly contingent in terms of the justification of a relative stability there will be intense events (the structure is *there* as much as the event is *there*). In the later works, Lyotard abandons strict all-too-transcendent distinctions in a favour of immanent and evanescent divisions drawn within two nihilisms understood as complexes. He is then able to define matter as the vibration that occurs where affects make contingent structures tremble between the two nihilisms. Thereby he frees thought and style to reveal vibration in a much wider range of affects and to wake that vibration in endless structures, regardless of scale and critical legitimacy: his philosophy becomes polymorphic again.

All stripped down

What does it matter, a dream of love

Or a dream of lies

We're all gonna be the same place

When we die

Your spirit don't leave knowing

Your face or your name

And the wind through your bones

Is all that remains

And we're all gonna be

We're all gonna be

Just dirt in the ground

(Waits, 1992, 'Dirt in the Ground')

In Chambre sourde and La Confession d'Augustin, Lyotard is working with great care on form but with great speed on content, opting for powerful suggestiveness rather than intricate investigation. His style and thinking are allowed to alight far and wide and their hold on us depends on how open we are to his powers. I only want to explicate further one of his suggestions: on the role of the sensuality of resonance in the throat. He claims that this resonance is always at work in the background where there is an emergence of consistent Xs (*humans?*). It is what defines the style of a voice, but also the despair of never having hold of the grain of the voice. This resonance allows us to sense that, despite the construction of the self and of the subject in human communities, a deeper matter lies behind that construction and its collapse: cycles of constructive and negative nihilism springing out of one another and undoing final ends).

The points that emerge out of Lyotard's work concerning the resonance and stridency of the material effects in the voice mirror the development of the works of Tom Waits, the American singer and song-writer. Waits' work has slowly developed from early songs built round cameos of ordinary human figures, everyday experiences

and bitter-sweet tales, to more abstract howls and laments, where we feel that an inner turmoil is expressing itself, rather than being represented. In Chambre sourde, Lyotard observes the way in which the grasp of a conscious line of thought is underscored by sounds and vibrations that always exceed that line whilst troubling it. This trouble has always been in Waits' work too, but the way in which it has been allowed to emerge has become more and more direct, that is, lacking the mediation of a reflection on trouble. This move strengthens from his Swordfishtrombones on. Reaching its apogee *for me* in Bone Machine, it is accelerated by German musical hall and expressionist traditions in The Black Rider, only to become more domesticated, but not necessarily less effective, in the more sophisticated Mule Variations.

In his early cameos, like 'Step right up', a familiar figure, in this case a street vendor, is over-played to the point of a humorous and sometimes sad delirium: we are led to reflect upon the abnormality and strangeness behind everyday figures. The same effect is also achieved in cameos of drunks 'The piano has been drinking' and love-struck or lovesick characters 'Rosie', 'Martha'. The drunkenness is a sad or comic effect that lights up and sometimes explains the character's chatter. The love-sickness gives the songs pathos where the suffering of the characters is cause for empathy. In the snapshots of everyday experiences, the effect of strangeness is achieved by a musical elevation of the event: a trip on a downtown train, scenes in diners or the glimpse of another's gesture becomes a glorious and all-consuming event. The bittersweet tales make us laugh or stop in shock through an underlying menace and violence in apparently easy going recounts of ordinary lives. Similar to David Lynch films, songs like 'Frank's wild years' reveal a potential for horror and the miraculous in our plain and apparently settled lives.

But, alongside the effects that play on the disjointedness of structures and situations, Waits has long experimented with the invasion of melody and lyrics by violent and unexpected sounds or by a disharmonious instrumentation. He invents new instruments or steals sounds from the street, or from common implements, in order to break the melodious effects of his songs. His voice is allowed to grate to the point where some may find his singing an intrusion in the songs. These effects and voice do not involve a play between structures, but instead, the invasion of something that does not appear to belong in any of them, an intrusion rather than a counterpoint (*Lui: And does Waits intend all this? Elle: I don't love you anymore*). It is these effects that Lyotard calls matter and that he investigates through the concept of stridency, arguing, against those who prefer melodious cover versions of Waits' songs, that style and truth in art lie in stridency. So when Waits allows metallic screeches and clangs, or the fusing of drum and percussion in door-slamming, or off-key and off-beat instrumentation, or the low pitched howl, a shredding of his voice-box, to 'ruin' his otherwise beautiful songs, he brings to life Lyotard's insights into stridency: 'But the strident scream lacks manners, lacks restraint, it flouts the decency of waves banished into silence. In a flash, the unheard of exhibits itself on the edge of the audible.' CS, 86)

Lyotard draws out two lines of thought from this stridency. The first concerns the different ways in which we are rendered powerless by it: the way in which our efforts to set boundaries to our experience are undone. The second works on the consequences of that powerlessness: what it does to our sense of self, or, more accurately, to the overlapping zones of consistency that we call our self, body and

subject, since these are already mined from within and thereby seep into one-another. He begins the 'Stridency' chapter of Chambre sourde by drawing on the scientific and moral approaches to the 'phenomenon' (as he has before on the same theme in Libidinal Economy, Lyotard 1993a, 111-12). When subjected to stridency, as defined scientifically, the ear is ravaged only for a short time, rapidly becoming deaf at that frequency and thereby acquiring protection. But, according to Lyotard, that definition misses a more profound stridency that does not allow for such easy barriers. Profoundly strident are all sounds that work as if they are on the verge of reaching levels so painful as to cause deafness. They are strident because they only threaten the pain leading to deafness, thereby leaving the subject on a threshold that Lyotard describes as a terrible oscillation: 'And the struggle begins, at the monster's front, undecided between the life of sounds and the silence of death.' (CS, 86) Deafness becomes an analogy for the *false* moment of salvation where something terrifying is banished and ignored. Real stridency does not allow this banishment to take place. How?

In Chambre sourde and in the Augustine book, everything on the limit is sexual. The sexual is polymorphically perverse, that is, it is not attached to any form of nature or limit in experience. It is merely sensual vibration on a limit, wherever that may lie. This is why Lyotard experiments with a varied sensuality and erotic language through the books. The sexual is what comes closest to the parallelism of the two nihilisms: the desire for the comfort of a particular consistency, its destruction in the emergence of structure, the tumble into despair at that destructive return, the swoop out of the abyss because it contains no inhibiting structures, with no rules other than an openness to whatever may drive the cycle forward. So, according to Lyotard,

stridency is indecent, associated with the feeling of being the object of a flaunting of proper morality, but also the anguish of being raped: ‘... an anguish essential to the self explodes suddenly, the anguish of being raped.’ (CS, 86) It is also a sign of our attraction to indecency – horror and temptation: ‘But the inaudible that the scream announces gains an audience, so to speak, in the exiguous listening that it puts to the rack: waking in anguish, and mixed up with it, a desire to push the availability to hear beyond or short of what it is normally permitted to do.’ (CS, 87)

To be the locus of a strident event is therefore to be at the same time ravaged and seduced out of sensual, intellectual and moral complacency. This combination goes beyond our strategies for self-protection, since we cannot block the event out, given its capacity to lure us and since being lured involves a ‘sacrifice of the self’. The sacrifice is necessary because the self is defined by the boundaries that have been crossed, that is, the event exceeds what is known by and what can be handled by the self and yet manages to call out to it: ‘Sexual madness: I cannot have what you have, so I want it. The strident scream calls for the sacrifice of the self.’ (CS, 88) Thus, when Waits sings the lyrics quoted at the front of this section, the chill does not come from the disjointed clichés, impoverished descriptions and simple-minded impressions that he mixes together for surreal effect. It comes from the way in which this dull surface is shaken by the voice that resounds through it. Like meeting a nightmare figure from a world estranged from and vilified by our own (*madman, drunk, priest, atheist, animal, aesthete, ascetic, machine, fluid, only you can know*), there is no choice in our mixed feelings of disgust and attraction – though both of these can be denied either on the spot or later, to little effect.

Waits' voice affords a resistance against the inscription of death into a well-defined code. Death becomes strange again. Not in the sense, of something unknown or unknowable, but as something that works at the very heart of what *we* take to be known, in order to pull it apart. This is not a romantic effect, as if we could bathe in our feelings: just strange enough to confirm us in our opinions. On the contrary, opinions become irrelevant and knowledge ineffective. This resistance of the voice, or more precisely, of the throat, is deployed by Lyotard against philosophical tradition and the layers of sediment it deposits in other disciplines. Again, it is important to stress that this resistance does not depend on an essential definition of that which is capable of triggering resistance, as could be concluded from the extreme roughness of Wait's vocals. Neither should we conclude that, because a number of Lyotard's subjects are philosophical, there is a privileged role to play for an anti-metaphysical resistance. There is only an art of chancy experimentation, conducting minute and precise events capable of making contingent edifices tremble. That art will not be subject to dialectic or teleology. As if we had to fall into the error of understanding jazz as a development towards an extreme and final limit, in Ornette Coleman and free jazz, for example. The art of limits does not tend towards a limit. It folds ever changing limits back into decadent structures: 'Thus, [free jazz] is an accursed part that, down to its most obscene scraps, will have served to recast jazz in its most profound alterity, whilst participating in its future...' (Moussaron 1990, 244)

Resisting the fleshless eye

When Lyotard turns to the voice in his late works, he is developing a resistance to the general dominance of what Gary Hatfield has called the fleshless eye, in his reading of Descartes and Augustine. The core of any thought process should be purely rational, because its periphery is necessarily and perhaps happily sensual as well as intellectual: '... Descartes affirmed a deeper sense in which the mature judgements of the intellect frame the deliverances and correct the errors of the senses ... For Descartes maintained that, although the senses themselves do not deceive, they provide material for error in the obscure sensations of colour, sound heat and so on.' (Hatfield, 59) Because sensuality is as capable of leading us into error and ignorance, as it is part of our well-being and humanity, we need the pure guiding light of reason, the fleshless eye, to help us decide between truth and error in the insecure hybrid world of mind interwoven with body. We know that this core exists, is truthful and is capable of providing the basis for a reliable method, because we have arrived at it following a meditative practice that reveals these as indubitable. Through a practice of meditation inherited from Augustine, Descartes finds a way of cutting through the uncertainties of the flesh to a certainty that is communicable to others through the communication of the meditation:

... Descartes was hoping to help the reader discover, through the process of meditation, a source of impersonal, objective judgements that lies hidden in the intellect. The meditator is to sift through his own experience until he arrives at that which compels assent, and thereby to discover what lies behind the possibility of universal agreement in such subject matters as mathematics and logic.' (Hatfield, 69)

In teasing out the return of sensuality in each stage of Augustine's Confessions and by awakening the voice in reflexive thought, Lyotard seeks to undermine both the practice of meditation bequeathed by Descartes and Augustine and the pure intellectual intuition it is deemed to arrive at. Lyotard is not deterred from his efforts by common remarks that this method and foundation have been 'proven' to be flawed by successive waves of critics. He has always had a moral and political ear for the bastard descendents of apparently discredited philosophical ideas, for example, in the way we cling to the idea of progress despite criticisms of the concept and the absence of any clear and non-paradoxical idea of what secure progress would entail, and in the disillusionment with the many forms it has taken in the past. So, as Hatfield points out in the conclusion to his article, Descartes and Augustine set the parameters for a project that we have not merely stuck with through thick and thin, but also interiorised: 'Not only does the tradition make (what it will of Descartes; Descartes has made the tradition.' (Hatfield, 72)

Lyotard concentrates on the legacy of the belief in the presence of a purely intellectual inner self. He seeks to use the voice as material event to render the legacy void, so that a more unstable, but more open struggle may follow. A material other is insinuated into the most pure inner self through our voices: 'Lying in wait in our voice-boxes, a small bird of prey or an insect would be watching, clandestine, in the baggage of phonation.' (CS, 91) His arguments for this unknowable thereness are negative, reminiscent of his use of Kant's negative signs of historical progress studied in (Lyotard 1983, 236-8). The effect of hearing our own voices on tape is a negative sign of this otherness. We become so used to hearing our voices that this strange other

disappears. It does not even reappear when we hear our voices on tape, since we even refuse to accept that voice as fully our own. But the reason we cannot do so is a sign that the strange `parasite' is at work in the background when we speak, since when we hear a recording its absence turns our voice into that of a stranger. This sign, though, is not strong enough for Lyotard. It does not tell us enough about the quakes and trembling that the parasite can unleash within us.

So he describes another such negative sign in the decoupling of voices, more properly throats, when we fall out of love. In love, we tune into the secret and unheard inner resonance at work in the other's voice box. How does he know this? Because, when love ends, the other's voice loses its capacity to stand in the same relation to us as our own. Hence the terrible anguish on experiencing this rupture: `The anguish here is of a completely different sort than the narcissistic wound experienced by the self `deceived' by a lover. No, the catastrophe that comes about with May's confession, is that her throat suddenly becomes unsoldered from his.' (CS, 94) This loss is not of something that we held fast, that we could identify as having lost (*I cannot believe she took the signs of our shared life. He leaves me a fool in the eyes of others.*) It is rather the anguish of losing a companion in the state of inner separation. We do not know we live with this state, except when we lose the companion. In love, we share the experience, not of perfect union with ourselves but of disunion. `You are as strange to me as I am to myself' – a proposition that cannot be thought, only felt negatively.

Love is not symbolic. It is not about two halves of a perfect whole, that belong together and that pine when apart. It is two material events that come together due to a

shared internal separation: `... love (or fraternity) does not make one voice of two, because lovers (or comrades) do not, never, hear one another, but love makes two throats become one, for whom the absolute of existing, nothingness, is silenced together...' (CS, 94) This explains why Lyotard spent so much time writing on Malraux in his late works. In Malraux, Lyotard found a comrade with whom he could share a profound destructive and constructive nihilism. Malraux's works provide the examples of shared voices and love that become Lyotard's negative signs of an inner material drive. But love is an extreme example, why should it be taken as evidence for the illusory nature of meditation and the fleshless eye? Could it not be that love, as studied by Lyotard, is the result of exactly the kind of error and confusion that the light of reason should correct? More seriously, does not this error lead us away from the possibility of transparent communities based on the inner light or reason and towards a belief in contingent and limited unions? These unions will never provide a firm basis for the rational construction of societies, since they are posited on a primary division, the shared event of an ungraspable other, that is doomed to disappear once it is subject to firm structures.

Communion and community

The answer to these questions lies in Lyotard's description of a further negative sign: the gulf that separates the self and the I-without-self (*eyeless flesh*) in the events triggered by the work of art. The reception of a work involves a conscious reaction accessible in terms of the self and its knowledge of the work, of its significance for

the self, of their shared history and culture, of shared criteria of taste. But, as an aesthetic event, the true work of art also involves a material event, a vibration within the locality that we call ourselves, that cannot be reduced to that which can be accessed in terms of the self, even when it reflects on sensuality: 'The trial of existence of the true reader, hardly a feeling, other than anguish, lips the obsession that the character struggles with. The reader renders it actual without being able to pronounce it.' (CS, 96) The impossibility of this reduction is a sign that there is an event beyond the self and this is the only event where there is true communion.

The separation of the self and the I-without-self is the reason why positive notions of community, based on shared essences, rationality or history, are always illusory. They depend on core references to the self and to the subject at the expense of efforts to bring different localities of eyeless flesh into a shared material vibration. Each time community-inclined thinkers make claims to unity by referring to that which we can be conscious of, they in fact separate us further from the capacity to unite, by holding to the error of thinking that events can be, must be, cognisable:

Each time good sense affirms that the inaudible "voice" is homogenous to the audible one, without ever doubting that the former is a voice, good sense omits that what passes through the throat is not an object of perception. It remains unknown by the self, absolutely forgotten by condition. It has never been and will never be heard, even when we record it, since, *ipso facto*, playback turns it into the voice of a self in the world, and hence abolishes it. (CS, 98)

So there is a constant struggle between the self and the I-without-self that mirrors the play between the two nihilisms. The self attempts to structure events as knowledge, whilst the I-without-self only emerges when this structure is interrupted. That is why communion, Lyotard's sensual response to the demand for community, depends on stridency and nihilism.

Stridency breaks the developing structures associated with the self by both shocking and seducing us. The shock puts the event beyond knowledge, at least for a moment. The seduction by-passes the defence mechanism of refusing to experience that which is too strange, too shocking: 'When the self is in agony, an anonymous I comes in touch with the immutable night, for an instant.' (CS, 99) Stridency affords a communion with others, where no communication is necessary, including any limit-relation through the face or flesh. Instead, this communion is a shared rebound from the depths of a nihilism that threatens all attempts at building community and all attempts at anything like transparent communication:

We are lovers or brothers through the fusion of impervious throats. Likewise, the artwork puts absolute solitudes in communication with one another and with the stridulation of the cosmos. As different as they are, [Barthes and Bataille] admit to the same paralogism: that separation is transitive, without mediation, without interlocution. (CS, 111)

To those who would claim that this is a desperate and unnecessary move into mystical aesthetics, where the world is crying out for practical politics based on philosophies of community, the answer is that they are meant for one another. The latter, despite their

worthy impulses, are cause for terrible moments of nihilism (*You never feel them?*).

The former come out of nihilism with new bursts of energy like love and communion, they will then fall again. The resistance of stridency is not against community, but with the terminal nihilism that lurks within it.

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