

# Interpretation

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Biographies of many of the prominent thinkers of what is commonly called “French theory” have appeared in recent years, but Jean-François Lyotard is a notable exception. Though Kiff Bamford makes no claim to definitively fill this gap, his book is the first to offer extensive and reliable biographical information on Lyotard. Taking into consideration the limits set to the author by the format of the series in which this biography appears, one can only admire how Bamford, on the basis of his intimate knowledge of the whole oeuvre, has succeeded in tracing lines between Lyotard’s life, thought, and work. Following the maxim that a passing remark sometimes proves most apt for disclosing an author’s intention, he readily highlights such passages from minor texts that are apt to shed light also on the major works. He thereby leads the reader to consider the Lyotardian oeuvre as a whole and to raise the question of the extent to which Lyotard’s texts can indeed be considered to constitute an oeuvre in the emphatic sense.

That a Lyotard biography has been missing might be traced to the fact that Lyotard himself observed a painstaking discretion regarding his own life. It is quite typical for Lyotard that while turning to the problematic relation between life, thought, and writing toward the end of his life, he did not thematize it in autobiographical texts, but rather by writing a biography of the French politician, intellectual, and writer André Malraux and by an attempt to rewrite Augustine’s *Confessions* (147–51). His work is, moreover, characterized by an outspoken resistance to the desire of speaking with a single

recognizable voice and by the constant search for new voices and styles behind which he himself might disappear. That this observation is to be taken quite literally is shown by Bamford's decision to reproduce the illustration accompanying an interview with Lyotard: instead of the usual photograph, this illustration bears the caption, "M. J.-F. Lyotard refuses to have his face reproduced" (121–22). Equally illuminating is Bamford's rendering of Lyotard's participation in a television series in which voice and image were not in synch and in which his voice questioned the presuppositions of a televised presentation of the philosopher (7). It would, however, be rash to conclude from such observations that knowledge of Lyotard's life would prove superfluous for a thorough understanding of his thought and work. On the contrary, as Bamford very convincingly shows, the connections between life, thought, and work prove to be very close in the case of Lyotard. In this respect, one has to mention first Lyotard's intense political engagement, which sets him apart from other well-known French thinkers. Bamford recounts Lyotard's years as a teacher in Algeria at a time of political awakening, which in 1954 led to a twelve-year involvement in the militant Marxist movement *Socialisme ou Barbarie* (32–44, 52–56, 61–63). His leaving this movement did not, however, mean the end of his political engagement. Even during the events of May '68 Lyotard was more than merely an interested observer, being more or less directly engaged in the events which also had a direct effect on his writings of that period. The effects of these events are also visible in his participation in university politics and in his experimenting with new forms of teaching (65–74). Perhaps one might even consider his coorganizing the exposition *Les Immatériaux*, to which Bamford devotes a whole chapter, as part of his political involvement (104–20). In this respect Bamford's remarks on Lyotard's first book prove to be particularly revealing. In spite of being an introduction to phenomenology aimed at a large audience, the book contains reflections with an immediate existential purport for Lyotard himself. Thus the concluding chapter, on the relation between phenomenology and Marxism, can be read as an attempt at a rational justification of his joining *Socialisme ou Barbarie* soon thereafter (46–52). Viewed in this light, the commissioned first book proves to be an integral part of Lyotard's oeuvre in that it reflects on the problematic relation of politics and philosophy, which may be said to constitute one of the leading problems of his thought. And as soon as one focuses on this leading problem, the constant change of voice and style no longer constitutes an objection to considering Lyotard's texts as an oeuvre in the emphatic sense. One may add that the existential significance of his oeuvre is also highlighted by the fact that Lyotard points to his political engagement in

almost all of his major works. Even in a circumstantial writing like *The Post-modern Condition* he inserts a footnote pointing explicitly to his involvement in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. In a particularly poignant way the link between life and thought becomes visible in his memorial for Pierre Souyri, a fellow member of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, in which Lyotard moreover introduces the subsequently central concept of the *differend* (37–38). Taking up this hint, Bamford proceeds to show how this concept, which in *The Differend* is introduced in a linguistic context, takes on an existential purport: Lyotard's life was profoundly marked by *differends* in the most diverging contexts and by the decision to resist the temptation of sublating them in a harmonious synthesis. As Bamford shows, such *differends* were not only at work in his family life or in his belonging to a particular nation or language, but also surfaced in his decision to marry a destitute Jewish woman against his family's wishes. Lyotard himself detected such *differends* also at work in his success in the United States, in the reception of his thought in Germany, and in his friendship with Derrida (17–20, 23, 26–28, 126–30). In all these cases the belonging to a “we” is unsettled by a *differend*, which not only has a direct existential import, but at the same time allows one to gain insight into the nature and presuppositions of the “we” to which the philosopher finds himself to belong. Perhaps Lyotard's turn to philosophy is to be understood as issuing from doubts about the validity of Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach and from the willingness to let himself be unsettled by the question concerning what might make living and writing worthwhile (63).

The lack of a Lyotard biography might, however, also be due to a decrease in interest in the thought of Lyotard soon after his death. After *Misère de la philosophie*, which collected texts preparing a projected *Supplement to the Differend*, posthumous publications have only very recently begun to appear. One could mention *Pourquoi philosophe?* (2012), *Logique de Levinas* (2015), and the six-volume collection of Lyotard's writings on art and aesthetics that was published with an English translation by the Leuven University Press (2009–2013). In an English-speaking context the situation is somewhat peculiar since translations often appear long after the original: the translation of Lyotard's first major work, *Discours, figure*, was published only some forty years after the original. It remains puzzling, however, why no attempts seem to have been made until now to make accessible again articles, contributions, and interviews that appeared in Lyotard's lifetime, but which he never collected himself: these by themselves would already fill several volumes. If the decrease in interest may be partly due to a change in the political and philosophical climate, the decisive reason may have to be sought mainly in some

characteristics of Lyotard's presentation of his thought. He never devised a system or developed a method which might have attracted acolytes. Moreover, each work has its own tone and style. Furthermore, Lyotard refers in a rather unconventional way to such divergent authors as Marx and Wittgenstein, Kant and Freud, the sophists and Levinas, thereby easily creating the impression of a savage eclecticism. These features of his art of writing may be traced back to his resistance to an auctorial and more importantly an authoritative voice. Lyotard refuses the position of authority which is often only too willingly ascribed to philosophers. Bamford therefore rightly remarks that "perhaps the one constant throughout Lyotard's work is a distrust of unquestioned authority" (7, 60). This remark forces the reader to raise the question whether Lyotard also considered the most radical form of authority, an authority which is apt to question philosophy in its very principle, and, if he did, how he sought to answer that challenge. Remarks such as the one quoted are apt to shed new light on the intention of Lyotard's thought. Thus the temporary neglect of his work might be due to the fact that that question itself is not seen to be of urgent concern in contemporary thought. However this may be, that question is directly relevant for Lyotard's purported opposition between modern and postmodern: Lyotard considers it to be constitutive of modern philosophy to claim the right of the lawgiver for itself, whereas he regards it as typically postmodern to drop that claim. One might therefore wonder whether Lyotard, by this decision concerning the presentation of philosophy, also overlooked the theoretical problem implied in that claim: Might it not be a misunderstanding to assume that Lyotard understood the divine command and believing obedience as the paradigm of the "event" par excellence? This misunderstanding (if that is what it is) might have grown from a neglect of the critical character of Lyotard's reception of Levinas. The reason Lyotard felt compelled to engage in a thorough confrontation with Levinas's thought is to be sought in the fact that Levinas was the most prominent of his French contemporaries to make the cause of revealed religion his own and to present it as *the* challenge to philosophy. This alone would suffice to ascribe to Lyotard's confrontation with Levinas an absolutely decisive role for the understanding of the intention of his own thought.

It is precisely the many qualities of this book which make the reader aware of what is missing without a comprehensive Lyotard biography and what it could achieve for a furthering of the understanding of his thought. It is therefore sincerely to be hoped that Bamford considers this biography as a kind of preparation. With his book Bamford has at any rate recommended himself as the person most suitable for bringing such an enterprise to a satisfactory end.