

Listening to the Mute Voices of Words: Errant Pedagogy in the Zone

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The COVID-19 pandemic hit some countries, including the United States, in the middle of the spring 2020 academic semester, forcing a phenomenal interruption in university life. Much has been written on the “shift” or “pivot” online that followed, and what it meant for students, professors, staff, administrators, parents and guardians, and the “future of the university.” The empirical effects of the reorganization—the issues of labor and precarity, autonomy and economics that surfaced, the changes in the educational experience—felt sudden and radical. There were just days or, in the best cases, weeks to depopulate the university and figure out how to reorganize the semester, to retool and reskill faculty, change curricula and syllabi, acquire, implement, teach, and learn new software, develop different teaching strategies and methods, find new work and study spaces, make new arrangements between school, life, and work, study, care, and health. Yet what struck me most of all was the *absence of change*. The pandemic, I was told, was upending life as I knew it, and probably forever. But the biggest shock wasn’t from an *interruption* but from a radical *continuity*. While the particulars were altered, the educational apparatus proceeded: classes, lectures, discussions, meetings, defenses, and reviews persevered, assignments submitted and graded, diplomas conferred. If the university was once seen as an ivory tower detached from society, the pandemic offered irrefutable proof that today it is not only part and parcel of society, but one of the social’s most flexible, dynamic, and even paradigmatic institutions.

What accounts for the university’s immediate subsumption of the interruption, and what the subsumption worked to rescue, was a distinct pedagogy, which doesn’t refer to any individual way of practicing education, but the general modes of relating to the practice, the underlying logics and organizing ontologies of it. Any attempt to reimagine the university or education will necessarily fail without a pedagogical investigation, and any efforts at such a rethinking must entail pedagogical experimentation. In this chapter, I approach this problematic by writing about Lyotard’s writings relation to space, literacy, and sound. The intention here (which isn’t mine) is to encounter a suspension that can’t be overcome, a pedagogical force that disseizes the mind and renders education subject to the (in)audible matter of words.

Grasping the zone

In his later works, Lyotard identified a new prevailing mode of urbanism that he termed the megalopolis, which has its origins in the city and the town–country relationship and resulted in part from the expansion of the city. This augmentation wasn't the domination of the city over the rest of the territory such that the outskirts and countryside became the city, but rather the incorporation of the territory into the megalopolis's expansive logic such that the city is no longer a unique coherent region. The megalopolis, that is, isn't a spatial form but a spatial process, an indeterminate zone that "does not have an exterior and an interior, being both one and the other together."¹ The expansive logic at work here is that of development and efficiency, a logic organized by the principle of exchange. This principle, which the megalopolis owes to the economic and political city, is what allows the megalopolis to consume the city, the suburbs, and the country, as all differences between and within each are rendered fungible. Just as important in this lineage is the zone, which denotes "a belt, neither country nor city, but another site, one not mentioned in the registry of places."² The zone, lodged between the city and its outside, was the sphere through which the principle spread, until there was only exchange. The megalopolis is the urban *process*, and the zone is the urban *form* and *style* the process generates. While the zone was once an unnamed yet distinct wayward and errant place as opposed to the named and ordered regime of the city, the operations of the megalopolis overcome the distinction through a kind of blurring that mobilizes the wayward and errant properties under the regime of development. If the zone was an indistinct place formerly, it was only because of its relationship to the city and the country.

One paper probes the contours of the megalopolis in relation to what it conquered: the *domus*, a form of domestic community or common, the household, under a monad of "space, time and body under the regime (of) nature."³ There's a sense of belonging in which exclusions aren't necessary. Here, language, life, and association are rhythmical and progressive, meaning they are both developmental and repetitive. It's a rhythm of constant and spontaneous work at the service of nature. The child is one such form of rhythm, work, and the natural: "Within the domestic rhythm, it is the moment, the suspension of beginning again, the seed. It is what will have been. It is the surprise, the story starting over again. Speechless, *infans*, it will babble, speak, tell stories, will have told stories, will have stories told about it, will have had stories told about it."⁴ Under the *domus*, the child is a fresh beginning that ensures continuity and repetition, that which maintains coherence through the possibility of beginning again. At the same time, and because of this, the child enacts the interruptions and excesses of the *domus*. There can be no domestic community without something to domesticate. The domestic rhythm, to put it differently, doesn't suture or heal interruptions, but "*scars* over" them.⁵ Neither suppressed nor absorbed, unpredictable and unintelligible disruptions are simply a structural part of the natural realm under—and for—which humans produce their domiciles. Nature, impossible to subject to cognition, is fate.

Lyotard says he can only write about the *domus* from within the megalopolis, an urban form of community that's not based on a relation to nature but to exchange. There's no more memory, narrative, or rhythm, just databanks and algorithms. The megalopolis, in other words, is the geographic manifestation of what he terms "the

system,” which operates according to the logic of performativity where, driven by the demand to maximize the efficiency of inputs and outputs, “everyone seeks and will find as best s/he can the information needed to make a living, which makes no sense.”⁶ The megalopolis has replaced the order of the *domus*, broken apart its rhythmic and spatial belonging to introduce a process of communication and commerce between individuals. In the place of an order dictated by the mystery of nature it installs a democratic and capitalist system based on reason, rationality, and exchange. The system prohibits mystery and interruption not through repression or exclusion, but through incorporation and development. Everything can and must be brought within its structure.

The spokespeople of the megalopolis tell us that this is progress and justice. By making everything transparent and communicable, by bringing the *domus* outside, after all, we can resolve all problems, address all wrongs, repair all divisions. Such inclusion, however, ultimately works to transform the untameable interruptions that pervaded the *domus*: “What domesticity regulated—savagery—it demanded. It had to have its off-stage within itself.”⁷ Whereas the *domus*, haunted by interruptions, accepts opacity *qua* opacity, the megalopolis consumes interruptions, rendering opacity as nothing more than an unrealized transparency. This consumption is fundamental to its development: “Secrets must be put into circuits, writings programmed, tragedies transcribed into bits of information . . . The secret is capitalized swiftly and efficiently.”⁸ There is no service to mystery, no submission to interruptions that would compel us to construct a domicile. There is no need for shelter without the threat of the untameable, and the zone’s internal spatial divisions are inessential, being merely rooms in a massive museum that can shift, collapse, or emerge as more objects accumulate. What is essential is “the multiplicity of competing figures,” which provides the megalopolis with “an air of critique thanks to the comparison possible between ‘good objects.’”⁹

Here we can approach the pedagogical apparatus that accompanies and facilitates the spread of the megalopolis. To compare is to subject different objects to a common measure, and is predicated upon according or giving a form to something. In according a form, something is placed under an existing category or concept, while in giving a form, a new category or concept is created. Both “forms and concepts are constitutive of objects, they produce data that can be grasped by sensibility and that are intelligible to the understanding.”¹⁰ This pedagogy of *grasping* is the motor of the megalopolis, which positions everything as a potential object to be known and exchanged. Under the *domus*, the child is both a child and a future adult, a something and a someone. Simultaneously an interruption into and a legitimation of continuity, the *domus* serves the child. In the megalopolis, the child is merely a deficient adult, one that doesn’t need to be tamed but needs to be developed by grasping, through which the child learns how to grasp as it itself is grasped. The child or the student is not something that *will* speak (as in the *domus*), but someone that *can* and *must* speak.

The methods and contents—the information, knowledge, politics, habits, or beliefs they represent—are (largely) irrelevant. While specific instances of grasping are guided by specific ends, grasping itself is a never-ending process, a constant development that never stops for the individuals of the megalopolis as we expand the museum. In the university of the megalopolis, then, it is less significant *what* one grasps and more important that one learn *how* to grasp. This accounts for the refrain of administrators,

admissions counselors, and public relations officers: we are preparing students not just for jobs that don't yet exist, but for an entire world that doesn't yet exist. By "world," they mean the specific internal configuration of the museum, which doesn't yet exist because it is the object of endless development, an end in itself, an end without any end.

The flexibility and openness of the megalopolis corresponds with that of its pedagogy. Anything and everything is only a new possibility to be realized, a new unknown to be grasped. How exciting! Even the worst of problems can be accommodated, for each new dispute or tragedy "requires new regulations, other forms of community that must be invented."¹¹ Every *x* is exchangeable and capable of entering into the circuits of the megalopolis, and if an *x* isn't so at the present moment, then through grasping it will be so in the future, at which point it will be placed, compared, and evaluated alongside the other objects in the museum. This will happen efficiently through the individualization and diversification of learning styles, objectives, outcomes, assessments, and evaluations. Any gap between possibility and actuality must be bridged by the imaginary as quickly as possible. All learning is therefore active learning, whereby *x* is transformed into a known variable, rendered transparent, known by the mind, and placed alongside other in-different objects for comparison in the endlessly expanding museum of the zone. Nothing is outside the power of imagination or the mind's ability to grasp. Everything is directed toward the individual of the megalopolis, in need of decipherment and comparison.

If Lyotard can only write what he does about the *domus* from within the megalopolis, it's not because it was a previous, empirically definable stage of history that demands a distance for comprehension. He doubts it ever actually existed as a form of community. Instead, it has to do with the very struggle over pedagogical relations, and the resistance to grasping in and for the zone. There is always something that resists development: the *domus*, which exists within the megalopolis as the force of impossibility, which "is not only the opposite of *possible*, it is a case of it, the *zero* case of possibility."¹² The way to inhabit the megalopolis is "by citing the lost *domus*,"¹³ by inhabiting the zero case of possibility of childhood. The *domus* exists as "the child whose awakening displaces it to the future horizon of his thoughts and writing, to a coming which will always have to be deferred."¹⁴ Childhood—which is linked with thought and writing—includes but is more than a beginning and passing stage of life, and also refers to a recurrent state that runs counter to and interrupts development. Biological childhood is when the human is in-human, when we're radically dependent on others yet without the capacity or means to recognize, account for, or respond to this dependency. The child isn't a human yet because there is no "I" that can speak. As a recurrent state, childhood or infancy is an interruption in the subject's humanity, in which we can't participate in the debate, dialogue, reason, or exchange that is so essential to the megalopolis. The child is, in short, stupid, and the stupidity of the child is the pedagogical stake of education in the zone.

Illiteracy in the zone

The trajectory of development in grasping proceeds from ignorance to knowledge. Ignorance is the possibility of communicable and exchangeable knowledge. The

ignorant student is one who doesn't know but can learn how to answer. The object of ignorance, even if that object is a subject, is an opacity that can be rendered transparent. Through grasping, ignorance develops into competent and articulate knowledge. Ignorance, like grasping, is always active, constantly on the move toward mastery, destined for its proper place amongst "the billions of padded messages" in "the immense zone."¹⁵ Stupidity, which can never be developed, threatens this trajectory. Stupidity never has an answer, and isn't even sure what the question is, let alone the proper referents. This isn't the absence of thought, but another mode of thinking altogether, thought's internal other, chronically disobedient incapacity to actualize and articulate. As Lyotard defines it at one point, it is "a no-saying amid the always already said."¹⁶ Such a no-saying isn't the refusal to speak—which would necessitate the ability to speak—but the very impotence and failure of speech, its permanent opacity. It is only, Lyotard writes, in a state of stupor that we can access this impotent energy, "because it consists only in the timbre of a sensitive, sentimental matter."¹⁷

Organized around the pedagogy of grasping, the zone's museum has "no need for writing, childhood, pain" because it is "an economy in which everything is taken, nothing received. And so necessarily, an illiteracy."¹⁸ There is no service or surrender to the untameable, no obligation to live with interruptions. Childhood as a recurrent inhumanity and writing are inessential to the megalopolis because they can't factor into exchange. They are relegated to the zone's ghettos, which aren't planned by the metropolis as spatially distinct areas, but instead are the result of "prodigal thought" that "*secretes* the wall of its ghetto."¹⁹ The ghetto walls, that is, are the discharge of the secret, marks of stupor that can't be grasped. Illiteracy, on this reading, isn't the negation or suppression of literacy, but instead a development of literacy as grasping, through which forms and concepts constitute objects under the mind's direction and the subject's will. These traces are what the megalopolis could do without and are the reason it tries to develop the child as quickly as possible. They are also what can open an alternative pedagogy to grasping, which I want to sketch by turning to some of Lyotard's writing on writing and sound, to gesture toward an errant literacy.

In his letter ostensibly addressed to David Rogozinski, Lyotard comments on Claude Lefort's analysis of George Orwell's *Nineteen-Eighty-Four*. What is of significance to Lyotard, first, is that Orwell's book isn't a work of criticism but of literature. Criticism, as we have seen, is perfectly acceptable to, and even desirable for, the megalopolis. The kind of writing Lyotard is after is one that "demands privation" and thus "cannot cooperate with a project of domination or total transparency, even involuntarily."²⁰ Orwell's hero, Winston, writes the novel not as a manifesto or theoretical excurses, but as a private diary, an act that begins as a resistance through which Winston encounters his "secret universe."²¹ Yet as he writes his innermost thoughts—driven by an attempt to escape the system—he *articulates the secret*, therefore obliterating it and facilitating its swift and efficient capture in the megalopolis. The capture and defense of the secret hinges on the relation between language and writing, which are both allied and opposed to each other. "One writes against language, but necessarily with it. To say what it already knows how to say is not writing. One wants to say what it does not know how to say, but what one imagines it should be able to say."²² We can only write *with* language, but we write *with* language to move beyond or outside of it.

When the secret is absorbed into the megalopolis through articulation, writing is subsumed by language. But this domination is never really total as long as writing takes place, because writing is “one region where restlessness, lack, and ‘idiocy’ come out into the open.”²³ This is the childish stupidity that emerges through writing, which always indicates there is something that language can’t capture, that can’t be reduced to information. There seems to be a kind of writing that’s most open to stupidity, which Lyotard finds in Walter Benjamin’s writings on childhood, which don’t *describe* childhood but indicate “the childhood of the event and inscribe what is uncapturable about it.”²⁴ In describing childhood, I might seek to articulate something new about childhood, to show how it’s unique. But this would remain tied to the megalopolis’s logic of development, in which an event is transformed into an innovation, something new that can be sold or circulated throughout the infinite exchange routes of the megalopolis. Each innovation is a child that has grown up. Instead, childish reading-writing is about an *initiation* into childhood—an unknown that remains unknown and only appears through traces. Instead of the diary, then, the more appropriate act of resistance in the novel is the production of idiom, singular words that can’t be translated or transferred, which articulates that which can’t be captured and, in so doing, never quite succeeds at signaling what it names. Because the idiom always fails, it’s the experience of initiation without development. The idiom is singular but also shared, a common point of contact in which we share in the secret. In love, there is “the never-ending search for a different idiom of sensibility, this vertigo where my idiom and yours falter, where they look for exchange, where they resist and discover each other.”²⁵ The idiom is never complete, can never capture what it wants, and hence cannot grow up into an innovation, destined always and only to the experience of initiation.

The megalopolis is not reducible to the totalitarian system in *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* but what the two share in common is the reduction of writing to language. The megalopolis doesn’t seek to eliminate writing, but to translate its singularity as an initiation that *must* grow up into an innovation. Lyotard will later affirm this after the triumph of the liberal-capitalist-imperialist system, which did so precisely because it was *open* to writing, it *needed* writing and the secret, without which there would be nothing new to inscribe in its circuits. But it needs a particular kind of writing: innovative writing, adult writing, transparent writing.

Writing and listening to the voices of words

In several texts, particularly after he began writing about sound and music, Lyotard introduces a sonic dimension to literacy. In “Address on the Subject of the Course of Philosophy,” for example, he linked philosophical literacy to listening.²⁶ Because philosophy isn’t an object or a corpus of knowledge, but rather the activity of thinking and questioning, philosophical literacy is “an exercise in discomposure in relation to the text, an exercise in patience,” the patience of never being done reading, discovering “that you have not read what you have read,” such that “reading is an exercise in listening.”²⁷ In a short foreword to a collection of his works, which later appeared in

Postmodern Fables, Lyotard introduces three sonic dynamics of literacy, which each corresponds to a particular kind of writing.

First, there is *hearing* writing. When you hear yourself write, “you hear only something that has to be written,” are confident in the writing, “ahead” of it.²⁸ Hearing writing is a transparent communication between sound and text, the words in the head and the words on the page—where language and writing are allies. You’re confident that you’re writing what you’re hearing. Second, there is *listening* writing, which is uncertain writing, when you hesitate to write because of the suspension or gap between what you hear and what you write. This hesitation, Lyotard says, can lead in two directions. On one hand, you might “strap it down, make it severe, classical, academic,” arguing your points against another; on the other hand, it can also lead to a neglect of the writing.²⁹ If you’re uncertain, that is, you might disrespect the adherence of writing to language insofar as the links between the two are lost. This ambiguity ensures that you’ll have to continue to listen to the writing, continue to write again. Third, there is *not listening* writing. You’re not listening to the writing, but *for* something else entirely, beyond reading and thinking through words and language: “You lend an ear only to what comes along.”³⁰

We can take these distinctions as different relations to thought, with different temporalities. Hearing writing is a correspondence to formulations, or an immediate harmonization between language and writing. Listening writing is an interruption in the harmony, one that desynchronizes language and writing, thought and articulation. The relationship between thought and articulation is suspended, ambiguous, and unsettled, but still present nonetheless. Not listening writing is a sonic openness to the present, or an obedience to noise. Meaning is absent and without any relation to the writing. The reason why Lyotard ascribes illiteracy to the megalopolis, then, is that it is organized solely around hearing and listening. There is only information to be exchanged and knowledge to be produced. You can hesitate, yes, as long as you produce something intelligible. There isn’t a hierarchy of values within the three modes of sonic writing, however; it’s not as if hearing and listening must be resisted. In fact, the three modes might be either heterogeneously blocked together or viewed along a continuum. Like childhood, thought is something that’s recurrent, that’s within and beyond formulation. But it is through not listening that childhood is birthed. The child, after all, doesn’t hear words, but noise. The words are still there, of course, but they are unrecognizable, indeterminable, without any links or chains between them. They are words as not-words, words as charges, affects, or mute matter.

Just as there are different sonic forms of writing, there are different sonic forms of words. And if it is possible to not listen to writing, it is because the voice (of the word or of the thought) is mute, or muted. In an article on Freud’s writing, Lyotard notes that *mu* or *mut*, the root of “mute,” appears in a variety of words that designate sounds emitted by a closed mouth, such as “*to moan, to mutter, murmeln, murmurer, mugir*,” and in a parenthetical note writes that, “in French, even the word for word, *mot*, comes from this root, *muttum*.”³¹ Lyotard names this voice mute not because it is silent, but “because, whatever its timbre, it always muffles the *lexis*.”³² *Lexis* is articulated speech that appears when words are heard as arbitrary signs whose only meaning rests entirely on the real object they correspond with and represent. It’s *lexis* that we hear when we’re

hearing writing. *Lexis* is an entire schema of writing, reading, speaking, and listening organized around meaning that comes from and is expressed by one subject to another. The meaning might not be transparent, in which case it would be subject to development by, for example, the teacher of the megalopolis. The task here is to discern inflexions of the voice, measuring them against their natural, simple, or “zero” state in order to find information and make the subject cohere: “I say *this*, but I think that you really mean *that*,” or “You’re starting to find your natural writing voice!” Feedback like this assists in training the student to hear writing, helps develop the subject, its voice, its words, and its words’ voice into exchangeable information to be transmitted, circulated, and further developed, so that the student can participate in the endless construction of the megalopolis through communication.

There’s another voice that doesn’t change by degree but jumps in tone. *Phônē* is a voice that escapes from the legible, the *timbre* or *nuance* of the voice that doesn’t transmit any messages, doesn’t refer to something outside of itself, and is concerned with neither senders nor receivers. It makes sense without recourse to representation, without articulation, and signals only itself, and does so immediately. It’s the voice that comes from *pathemà*, the passion and pain of animality and affectivity, the capacity to receive and manifest affect through sounds. It’s therefore not subject to debate or the rules of discourse. The human has both *phônē* and *lexis*, the former being the inhuman of the human, the infancy of the adult. The child, Lyotard writes here, “has a voice, but doesn’t articulate. Non-referential and unaddressed, the infantile sentence is an affectual signal, pleasure, pain . . . *In-fans* does not have the means to *reply* to an articulated sentence that addresses it or refers to it” by the order of the *lexis* in which it has been placed before its birth.³³ The *phônē* renders childhood atemporal and incapable of development, for there is no “you” to address, to respond, or to request an address. When infancy recurs, it appears through *phônē*.

Phônē isn’t metaphysical or “absolutely outside” of discourse, but rather accompanies *lexis* by lending it its nuance. *Phônē*, that is, “can infiltrate a given place in the articulated structure, a given linkage, *without being heard*, precisely without inflecting the good order, and thus without having to reflect it.”³⁴ It isn’t heard because it happens in an instant, and there is no “one” there to synthesize it. Lyotard says that interior monologue is close to the atemporality of mute discourse, because the constituent elements of discourse occur simultaneously and thus without temporalization, synchronization, and conceptualization. Yet if we *don’t listen* to the word, we might hear the inaudible *phônē*.

What forms of sonic writing, then, can attend to the demand of childhood? One place Lyotard goes is Freud’s encounter with Ernst, or the Rat Man, a case that initiated Freud’s practice of free association and a new mode of sonic writing. When Rat Man reports that his parents knew a thought he had, but which he didn’t articulate, Freud at first tries to reduce the *phônē* to *lexis* because he’s trying to *hear* the thought, and he does so by taking up the position of the addressee in a position of knowing in order to put the rules of exchangeable discourse in force, so that a developmental process can take place where Rat Man and Freud learn the truth. With the shift to free association, however, there is a shift from hearing to listening. Freud loosens his role as a knower and abandons his role in the exchange of discourse, which gives the *phônē* of the words

a greater presence, not only through the individual words but, more importantly, through the relations of words amongst themselves. The inaudible and audible words appear in his notes during the session and after the session, to find a new kind of writing. “All writing,” Lyotard says here, “is this attempt to bear witness, by way of the articulated *lexis*, to the inflexible *phōnē*. Writing has a debt of affect which it despairs of ever being able to pay off.”³⁵

Elsewhere, Lyotard proposes two forms that writing takes, which we can see as running along this general framework. The first is rewriting as remembering, in which one tries to write again in order to get closer to the truth, to discover even more precisely the degree of inflexions in the words, and thus to get as close as possible to hearing writing so there are no errors, no excesses. The second kind is rewriting as working through, which he associates with free association. In this kind of writing, one suspends knowledge and decision to allow things to appear without links or meaning, and therefore as ungraspable. For this rewriting, “the only guiding thread at one’s disposal consists in sentiment or, better, in listening to a sentiment. A fragment of a sentence, a scrap of information, a word, come along.”³⁶ In the first mode, *phōnē* is *developed* and made to speak to the hearing writer, who ever-more precisely learns the real *lexis*. Meaning can be secured, the real beginning and end can be identified. In the second, *phōnē*’s force is merely allowed to show itself, and the writer both listens to the tone of articulation and becomes deaf to its tone so that it can hear the inaudible. By not listening to the *lexis* or the appearance of *phōnē* within it, the writer can let the inaudible *pathema* of the word through. Yet owing to the impossibility of the first kind of writing, we might, like Freud, discover the need for the second kind.

Words as silent teachers

Because the mute word can’t be developed, one can’t learn to listen or not listen to writing. We can only learn hearing writing. This is, in part, because we can *know* what hearing writing is: there are words, they mean things, and these meanings can be ordered, interpreted, and deciphered. This is the writing of the megalopolis, in which all differences and initiations are only new variables to be named, rendered transparent, and circulated. What is an appropriate pedagogical mode, then, for the other sonic forms? If they’re not learned, then how can they be taught?

Teaching errant literacy is a paradoxical pursuit in which teachers and students “suspend the activity of comparing and grasping” in order “to become open to the invasion of nuances, passible to timbre.”³⁷ This requires “a mindless state of mind, which is required of mind not for matter to be perceived or conceived, given or grasped, but *so that there be* some something.”³⁸ Literacy here entails an inversion of the current relationship between the subject and words. In the zone, the subject is the one who grasps words and, through composition, appropriates and exploits words. In errant literacy, we are the subjects of words. But words are not there *for* us to use, to inspire us or allow us to accord or give form. After all, “words want nothing. They are the ‘un-will,’ the ‘non-sense’ of thought, its mass.”³⁹ The excess of the word relative to meaning and signification is not a challenge to be overcome (anyway, it can’t). The lesson their

disobedience teaches us is our obedience. Hearing writing casts the excess aside, while listening writing flirts with excess, and not listening writing allows the secrets of the words to do their work. To be passible to the matter of words, however, isn't to be passive. It's not a matter of teachers and students throwing up their hands and surrendering the university to words. The writer still picks up the pen or places their hands on the keyboard.

Rather than grasp what this kind of literacy is, I'll instead offer two examples. The first is from Lyotard's second book on André Malraux. Lyotard writes that Malraux's writing is "a writing at the limit of writing."⁴⁰ Limit writing, which he also terms *absolute* writing, is done under the sovereignty of the word, is an act that "is authorized by no voice, aims at no end."⁴¹ Writing, in other words, is done to write, to express the *fact* of writing and to change this *fact* into an *artifact*. The fact is an action, a charge of matter that guides writing, which seizes on and disarticulates the written words to produce the artifact, its objectification that still contains a signal or energy within it. Malraux teaches us this through his conception and deployment of ellipses, on which, he says, "all art is grounded."⁴² The ellipsis is an anacoluthon that enacts or signals the incompleteness and failure of a sentence. In doing so, it "imposes silence on the verbiage of intrigues and allows to murmur the mutism that it covers."⁴³ We might think, first of all, of the ellipsis as an "etcetera," or that which indicates an addition of words to a phrase, which are thereby included through their exclusion. While we might assume their exclusion stems from their assumption, there is no way of confirming even the most standard and routine linkages. The etcetera not only signals an indeterminate and infinite number of words, but also remains mute as to their linkages. It follows that the meaning of the articulated *lexis* is likewise suspended or rendered ungraspable through errantry.

The ellipsis is mute in that it's neither silent nor articulated. In this way, the ellipsis might be an instance of what Lyotard calls the "affect-phrase," which "is distinct in that it is *unarticulated*."⁴⁴ Being unarticulated, the affect-phrase can't be linked with other phrases, and instead can only "suspend or interrupt linkages."⁴⁵ Its sense, that is, doesn't arise from a referent and doesn't emerge from the will of the sender, although, as in the elliptical case, it can emanate from the failure of the will and of the grasping drive. The ellipsis, that is, demonstrates grasping as an illusion. In an essay on Michel Butor, Lyotard gets at this pedagogical tension between grasping and errantry in the zone through the figure of the list. Butor's writing Lyotard considers is linked with travel and discovery, in which the list serves as a kind of zone between *lexis* and *phōnē*. "The list," Lyotard writes, "is the luminous imperial system's edging: an impossible place (an edge is unthinkable: it is that by means of which one thinks) where what the empire will compose and what the confessor will cause to speak are held in reserve."⁴⁶ Listing is an articulation of words in the absence of articulated linkages, and it can move us between hearing, listening, and not listening writing. The ellipsis is a testament to the latter, a documentation of the failure to document *phōnē* through *lexis* that, as an affect-phrase, renders words mute as it "eclipses the apparent movement of meaning," which also eclipses "the ego—its support."⁴⁷ Ellipses mute words and subject, rendering the latter passible to the charge of the former. Within, against, and beyond the chatter of the megalopolis where, through exchange, words blur into each other, the ellipsis cuts or

gashes the space around a word to set it apart, orphan it, establishing a zone between words that is neither inside nor outside of the word. As readers and writers subjected to the ellipses, we're stupefied and interrupted, drawn to the timbre and nuance of the word, which we can only try to think. The errant matter of words comes from that according to which I don't matter, and passes through me, leading me elsewhere but not developing me. A secret pedagogy secreted onto the ghetto walls in the zone: "..."

Notes

- 1 Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, tr. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1993] 1997), 24.
- 2 Ibid., 18.
- 3 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, tr. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, [1988] 1991), 191–2.
- 4 Ibid., 193.
- 5 Ibid., 192.
- 6 Ibid., 194.
- 7 Ibid., 201.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 27.
- 10 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 140.
- 11 Ibid., 31.
- 12 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 197.
- 13 Ibid., 200.
- 14 Ibid., 201.
- 15 Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 31.
- 16 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 202.
- 17 Ibid., 201.
- 18 Ibid., 199.
- 19 Ibid., 200.
- 20 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982–1985*, tr. Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas et al (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1988] 1993), 88.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., 89.
- 23 Ibid., 90.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid., 92.
- 26 “Address on the Subject of the Course of Philosophy,” in Lyotard, *Postmodern Explained*, 99–107.
- 27 Ibid., 101.
- 28 Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, 150.
- 29 Ibid., 150
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Jean-François Lyotard, “Voices of a Voice,” tr. Georges Van Den Abbeele, *Discourse* 14, no. 1 (1992), 130.
- 32 Ibid.

- 33 Ibid., 132–3.
- 34 Ibid., 133.
- 35 Ibid., 138.
- 36 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 31.
- 37 Ibid., 139.
- 38 Ibid., 140.
- 39 Ibid., 142.
- 40 Jean-François Lyotard, *Soundproof Room: Malraux's Anti-Aesthetics*, tr. Robert Harvey (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, [1993] 2001), 10.
- 41 Ibid., 32.
- 42 André Malraux, cited in Jean-François Lyotard, *Signed, Malraux*, tr. Robert Harvey (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, [1996] 1999), 87.
- 43 Ibid., 62.
- 44 Jean-François Lyotard, “The Affect-phrase” (from a Supplement to *The Differend*), in this volume _____(104)
- 45 Ibid., 105.
- 46 Jean-François Lyotard, “False Flights in Literature,” tr. Robert Harvey, in Lyotard, *Toward the Post-Modern*, ed. Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts (New York: Humanity Books, 1993), 129.
- 47 Lyotard, *Soundproof Room*, 62.