

Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi; Foreword by Fredric Jameson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, XXV + 110 pp., \$ 8.95.

In the introductory chapter to this slim but dense volume Lyotard defines postmodernism as an "incredulity toward metanarratives." The "condition" denoted in the title refers to the contemporary status of knowledge; knowledge for Lyotard is primarily scientific but also the basis for normative claims. Lyotard argues that knowledge is now marked by a crisis precipitated by questions about the legitimacy and proper role of narrative.

This crisis arose from a loss of faith in the explanatory potential of narrative.

Although the decline of faith in narrative is prompted by the search for legitimacy, the failure to accord narrative a legitimating role in scientific knowledge serves in turn to undermine not only the prospect of a scientific certainty but also any prospects for normative legislation or self-knowledge. Lyotard endorses this loss of legitimacy and embraces postmodernism as both a liberating condition for knowledge and as a method for destroying the remaining faith in grand Narrative, i.e., metanarrative.

Lyotard's quarrel here is not with narrative per se; for he thinks narrative is a kind of knowledge at least as legitimate as scientific inquiry. Narrative, which he understands as a fundamentally finite and local development, was forced to bear the undue weight of the more grandiose claims which scientific knowledge pressed upon its shoulders. Metanarratives are Frankenstein's engineered by science through an abuse of narrative. In reality, scientific knowledge has always been in competition with narrative. "Narration is the quintessential form of customary knowledge." For Lyotard modernity is the first condition that suffered a loss of meaning due to the loosening grasp that knowledge has on its principal form, narrative. Postmodernity would then be not the return to a pre-modern "meaningful" condition but instead the acceptance of the limited purview of "meaningfulness" and a final nay-saying to the dwindling faith in the comforting illusion of a metanarrative.

Lyotard rejects two of the reigning models of legitimation: the first is the theory of scientific legitimation, derived from Wittgenstein, based on performativity; the second is the model of legitimation as consensus, associated with Habermas. The problem with the performativity model is that it presupposes an overly stable system from which judgments of legitimacy issue. Performativity becomes the game of technology which has as its telos not truth but efficiency. The excess stability of this system resets upon the terror of a totalitarianism: "This is how legitimation by power takes shape." Lyotard's argument against the Habermasian model of legitimation through consensus is twofold: Since language games are finite and heteromorphous it is simply wrongheaded to search for metaperscriptives to inform a quest for universal consensus; secondly, it is not consensus but parody that is the true telos of discourse. More damning to Habermas than either of these objections is the observation that his theory of legitimation situates itself wholly within a narrative emancipation. This narrative, being a spiritual son of Hegel, also suffers from the congenital defect perpetrated by the subject upon Nature.

Although Lyotard rejects both these models, he nevertheless retains important elements of each in fashioning his own prescription for postmodern knowledge. He

retains the Habermasian concern for justice and an open-ended species of performativity. His model "would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown. Imagination becomes the key term in this renovation of prescriptive epistemology. Invagination depends upon the willingness to paralogically assert. One thus needs to request this willingness from the players in current scientific activity. "The only legitimation that can make this kind of request admissible is that it will generate idea, in other words, new statements." Legitimation proceeds from paralogy.

To facilitate the request for paralogy Lyotard asks that all data banks be open to the public. The difficulty in this request is that it presupposes a public composed of individuals not only interested but also capable of intervening in the construction of knowledge by making imaginative, paralogical moves within the existing language games. This is perhaps the least well-founded aspect of Lyotard's presentation.

Lyotard's article, "Answering the Question: What Is Postmodernism?," appears as an appendix to the book. The interesting move here is the illumination of the postmodern condition, along with the role played there by the imagination, by way of the aesthetic idea of the sublime. For Kant, the sublime is a product of the "conflict between the faculties of a subject, the faculty to conceive of something and the faculty to 'present' something." The sentiment of the sublime is altogether different from the judgment of taste, which depends on the false presentiment of consensus. The sublime sentiment "takes place ... when the imagination fails to present an object which might, if only in principle, come to match a concept." Modernist art which embodies an aesthetic of the sublime, gives existence to the unrepresentable as "fact". A postmodernist aesthetic of the sublime would go beyond a similarly inspired modernist aesthetic by denying itself what Lyotard calls the "solace" provided by the redundant consistency of form found in modernist works. Avoiding this recourse to a form that stultifies by presenting itself not as the imaginable but as the real, postmodern works of art realize that, "it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the consivable which cannot be presented."

The form of this book would have benefited greatly from an incorporation of the aesthetic arguments found in the appendix (which are quite strongly rooted in the aesthetic theory of Adorno) into the provocative analyses presented in this earlier sections. Had Lyotard concentrated his energies on an analysis of the modernist or postmodernist artwork, as both symptom and cipher of the reproduction of social life, the bite and cut of his commentary would have reached deeper. Such an analysis might have better equipped Lyotard to confront Habermas's aesthetic ideas (especially since this is an area of increasing concern for Habermas), rather than lead to the unfounded and casual dismissal of Habermas, on this score, or having confused the aesthetic sublime with Freudian sublimation.

The danger provoked by this particular limitation is ably demonstrated in Jameson's foreword to the text. Jameson shows that in the end, Lyotard's true desire is, like Habermas's for a situation or "condition" practically indiscernible from that of critical high modernism.

Thomas Huhn
Boston University