

Liotard's *Lessons in Paganism*

As a critique of, or perhaps as the consequence of the impasse of the modernist project of political emancipation through the power of reason, postmodernism has given voice to an intellectual community that apparently questions the privilege of its own rational discourse (and with all the self-reflexive irony that implies.) Abandoning the meta-narratives of Marxist theory, as well as that of late capitalism, many postmodernists have incited a rethinking of politics across the spectrum (and not without dissidence, confusion, and controversy.) Possibly the most representative of postmodernists in this regard is Jean-Francois Lyotard; what are meta-narratives? What is paganism? What role does politics play for Lyotard? And what does Lyotard have to say about relativism?

Lessons in Paganism (1989a) is an initial attempt by Lyotard to address just such questions. Narrative is the primary form of discourse that Lyotard concerns himself with here; contrasting the meta-narratives of modernism, which totalize the field of narrative so as to organize the succession of historical moments in terms of the projected revelation of meaning, with "little" narratives that are historically and contextually bound, Lyotard subverts the universal for the discontinuous and fragmentary. This in itself is not a surprising move for a postmodernist; yet, Lyotard goes on to make what might be called a rhetorical turn with his notion of narrative pragmatics. An analysis of narrative pragmatics as detailed in *Lessons in Paganism* follows; as a later qualification, relevant passages in Lyotard's essay *Universal History and Cultural Differences* (1989b) will also be detailed as well.

Lessons in Paganism is written in the form of a dialog, specifically a political debate. The introductory narrator emphasizes the political futility of both the left and the right (in the context of a possible socialist electoral victory in France): as a minority party, the socialists would have to compromise their political agenda in order to win over the opposition; the capitalists would inevitably launch a counter-offensive to undermine the social reforms as well. All hope is not lost though:

Everyman might turn out to be unpredictable if he gets tired enough of the production-consumption narrative capital forces on him to act out both at work and at home, and angry enough with the left for not enacting the promised scenario, to begin to tell and act out a thousand and one disturbing little stories of his own (p. 123).

The first narrator goes on to ask his partner why he considers ‘lessons in paganism’ so important given the bleak circumstances. The reply (in the voice of Lyotard) is that pagan means godless and such lessons are necessary for justice: justice in a godless society. While the liberal right is not bothered with justice, the liberal left is, but it is also still “extremely pious” (p. 123). What is new to the situation is that most intellectuals have rejected the Marxist narrative with the realization that it has had profoundly unjust effects wherever it has been realized (p. 123). And this injustice Lyotard traces to its piety (the piety of believing in its universal meta-narrative of politics and history.) While Lyotard acknowledges that the popular critique of Marxism has resulted in the marketing of ideas *a la* Clavel and Co. (the Nouveaux Philosophes), he suggests that this is not necessarily a bad thing: while their arguments are naive, they are a good sign that the intellectuals are no longer Marxist; and such marketing of ideas is not about fashion or even collusion with the right, it is about power: the power of narrative pragmatics.

As Lyotard defines it, pragmatics, “means all the complicated relations that exist between a speaker and what he is talking about, between the story-teller and his listener, and between the listener and the story told by the story-teller” (p. 125). Pragmatics traces the authority of narrative not to scientific truth (one narrative among others), but to the creative power to make and tell stories as such; a power that is also inherently political. The meta-narratives of universal history and politics (such as those of Marxism and late capitalism) are only one of many possible stories that can be told; they reference no ultimate truth, only previous narrations. This Lyotard terms diegesis: the reference of a narrative, the story that a narrative message stages “outside” words. A narrative is never made of raw events or facts, events and facts are the result of previous narratives which a following narrative uses as a reference (p. 126). By this, Lyotard does not mean to deny events and facts, but only that they are inevitably mediated by narratives.

Narratives involve the agency of the narratee (storyteller), the narrated (story), and the narrator (audience); implicit in such narrations are what is being told, what has been told, and what is being told. For example, those who justified the Marxist narrative borrowed from its narrator (Marx and Marxists intellectuals), its narratees (the workers), and its narrated (Marxist heroes) (p. 127). The Marxist meta-narrative (in the form of Stalinism) was undermined by the little narratives of Solzhenitsyn, Serge, Ciliga, Rousset, and Scholmer, not to mention the narratives of Prague '68, Budapest '56, China '57, Berlin '53,

Poznaz '53, Ukraine 1919-20, and Cronstadt 1921. As Lyotard emphasizes, the Stalinist narrative was challenged and eventually overcome not through revolt or theory, but through narrative.

Why were the intellectuals so late in hearing the stories of Solzhenitsyn and co.? Because instead of listening to the commissars themselves, they were busy listening to the justifications of the theoreticians, to the meta-narratives. This only reemphasizes the need to be godless (faithless in meta-narratives) in all things political for Lyotard. Theories themselves are only concealed narratives that mask their narrative in objective truth (scientific meta-narrative); the alternative to theories are fables (stories that fall outside of sanctioned meta-narratives.)

Isn't to abandon theory to abandon democracy? Democracy entails an abstract (and universal) public space in which the many debate public law. Lyotard maintains many voices are left out of this public space (women, children, slaves, foreigners, dissidents as in ancient Greece); to abandon this "pious" institution leaves an open door to paganism. What is desired is a society based on narrative, not knowledge. To illustrate, Lyotard refers to the *Pagus*, or the frontier region on the edge of town. Such regions were the habitats of the gods, and the cults which seduced (apatan) them. The prevailing godlessness was one of open duplicity. The cults deceived and seduced the gods through speech; speech as a way of producing effects, not professing the truth. As the ancient Greek sophist Gorgias defined it, speech for the just is an art form, for the unjust it is the want to be right. And the pagan gods are narrators themselves; demanding not to react but to reply, by displacing the gods narratives with ones own. Thus, the creative power of making and telling stories is honored rather than any particular story, be it god or cultic.

What do such pagan narratives have to do with the master narrative today, capital, with its god (money), its mass (discharging debts), and its grace (profit)? The master narrative of capital is in any regard godless, but not pagan according to Lyotard. It is godless because it has no respect for any one narrative, except for "the narrative which tells how narratives are told, listened to, and acted out" (p. 141). And it is not pagan for this very same reason; narratives are subordinated to the pretensions of origins. Lyotard contrasts parallel and serial systems of narration. Parallel systems all refer back to a specific author who comes to represent the origin (and authority) of the narrative, thus it is a form of piety (faith in origins.) Serial systems refer back only to previous narrations; origins are not referenced since ultimately

there are none (narratives all the way down.) The narrative of capital requires authors who are the sole originators of their stories (in order to reap the profits); any story can be told as long as this is the case. To combat this, Lyotard suggests putting narratives in series, and forgetting names; this stresses the content over the form of the narrative. The strategy of combating capitalist meta-narrative is to seize opportunities to harass both state and capital; against the abuses and exploitation of capitalism use laws and institutions; against the state, maintain the capitalist right to undermine its monopolies.

Lyotard closes his fable by asserting that stories are noble, reason is pagan, and justice is a perspective.

Destroy narrative monopolies, both as exclusive themes (of parties) and as exclusive pragmatics (exclusive to parties and markets). Take away the privileges the narrator has granted himself. Prove that there is as much power – and not less power – in listening, if you are a narratee, and in acting, if you are the narrated (and let the fools believe that you are singing the praises of servitude when you do so). And in the case of the Lyotard, justice means willing it (p. 153).

It is worth noting that certain pronouncements in *Lessons in Paganism* are later qualified in *Universal History and Cultural Differences*.

It is not advisable to grant the genre of narrative any absolute privilege over other discursive genres when we come to analyze human phenomena, and particularly the phenomena of language (ideology); it is still less advisable to do so when we adopt a philosophical approach. Certain of my earlier reflections may have succumbed to this 'transcendental appearance' (p. 314).

Heading such warnings, Lyotard asserts that the meta-narratives of communism and capitalism are no longer credible and that any modern project involving universal history is over; the age of intellectuals and parties is over as well. What is left to do is to trace a line of resistance to the modern defaillancy (failure).

While *Lessons in Paganism* testifies to the power of narrative, Lyotard's relationship to relativism is not made clear. In order to address this relationship, another important term in Lyotard's lexicon must be presented: the differend; it can be thought of as defining the critical gap between heterogeneous narratives (Readings, 1991, p. xxx). It is at this point of incommensurability that aesthetics and politics are to play their necessary role according to Lyotard. Testifying to the differend through aesthetic politics is justice for Lyotard; this is to say it is a problematic in which the narrative of fragmented differences subordinates a master discourse. How this is to be accomplished while avoiding the trap of relativism requires further qualification. Relativism is the result of a loss of faith in modernist epistemology; objective

knowledge becomes simply one way of looking at things, just 'telling stories'. However, relativism must legitimate its own claim to be more than just 'one way of looking at things' by imposing its own narrative as a meta-narrative, as the way of describing all ways of looking at things (p. 67). Thus, Lyotard considers relativism to be a concealed narrative, one that hides behind the presumption of rational discourse (and poses as a master narrative.)

It is Lyotard's notion of the figure that subverts master narratives (and semiotics as well.) As Lyotard argues, before the sign is a sign, the sign is a line. For example, the individual letters of the alphabet are made up of lines, or figures, that can't be reduced solely to their sign value. This calls attention to the rhetorical nature of the sign, as well as the vision necessary for the sign to appear, a vision which is not exclusively a discourse (and so the sign is rhetorical on both levels.) Expanding on this, narratives, political or otherwise, are viewed as rhetorical all the way through, both textually and phenomenally. In this way, Lyotard combines deconstruction with phenomenology while subverting the criticism of political irresponsibility.

Bibliography (APA 6th ed.)

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