

GO FIGURE

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The translation of *Discourse, Figure* has been a very long time in the making.¹ It is well over 20 years since I first became aware of a project to publish a translation of Lyotard's hugely important book, and wrote an enthusiastic report on it for Cambridge University Press at the request of Norman Bryson, whose own then-influential *Word and Image*, with its first chapter entitled "Discourse, Figure" seemed rather directly inspired by Lyotard's work. After all the intervening tragedies and peripeteia, here finally is this monument—a monument to Mary Lydon, its principal translator, who died in 2001, as well as to Jean-François Lyotard, forty years after its publication in French—perhaps in its very untimeliness appearing just in time to encourage new reading of Lyotard's still misunderstood and much undervalued achievement.

Lyotard spent his entire intellectual life pointing at things that weren't exactly there.² Long before the postmodern was untranslatably defined in terms of "présenter qu'il y a de l'imprésentable," the notion of "figure" in *Discours, figure* was already seeking to bring out—to present, if you like—a dimension that is not so much opposed to "discourse" as it is a disruptive and sometimes unwelcome inhabitant of discourse. Invisible, to different degrees, the different levels or types of figure (*figure-image, figure-forme, figure-matrice*) constitute a kind of haunting, a figuring that is even a dis-figuring, of the flat, tabular and rationally coordinated space that is, supposedly, that of discourse. The non-oppositional juxtaposition of "discourse-comma-figure" comes into its own in the comma, as it were—the hinge or what he'll later call the hyphen (*trait d'union, trait de désunion*) of the book's title.³ And some of the more memorable passages of the book occur as the always invisible figure interrupts discourse, makes it stutter, renders it more or less mute, brings silence and violence, this interruption being a mark of possible truth, no less. The preface to *Discours, figure*, "Le parti pris du figural," (difficult to translate: a translator's note here notwithstanding, I still prefer "taking the side of the figural" rather than "the bias of the figural"⁴) sees its running right-hand page header (in the French edition only) change from "Le figural comme opacité" to "Le figural comme vérité" (after two pages of which we'll arrive at "Le figural comme événement"), and wants to argue as follows: you might think that taking the side of the figural, showing that it is at work in principle in any discourse, amounts to taking the side of illusion, and destroys the possibility of the true by having "expression and affect" (the word is already his, DF, 15/10) bubble up disruptively in "signification and rationality." Doesn't this just amount to sophistry or (the word is Lyotard's, though placed in quotation-marks) "terrorism"? In bringing out and foregrounding the figure in your discourse, am I not violently denying you knowledge of what you are saying and implicitly claiming that I (or some other third party) can understand you, but that you cannot understand yourself?

It will become necessary... to have postulated that there exists a kind of rationality of expression, an order of causes of the unsignified, another discourse speaking from within your discourse that I can know, or that at least someone can. One will have to imagine that this someone possesses, or is, your discourse's other. One will even have to imagine the following "nonsense": that this other discourse that you do not speak but which speaks from within yours is nonetheless signifiable except by and for you, that I or someone can say it, that we can speak of you but not to you. Such is violence, or

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seduction. Philosophy, it is said, ends here. (DF, 16/10-11)

In fact Lyotard wants to refuse this alternative (“between well-meaning dialogue and Callicles” (*ibid.*)) in the name of truth, no less, a kind of deep truth that precedes the alternative of truth-and-illusion or philosophy-and-sophistry that he has just invoked. A truth that cannot be *spoken for* (side-swipe here at Lacan’s supposed prosopopeia of Truth), but that irrupts and grates in the discourse of knowledge: “Truth appears as an aberration when measured against signification and knowledge. Truth is discordant, and to be discordant in discourse is to deconstruct its order.” (DF, 17/12) This deconstructive irruption or eruption, which produces what Lyotard here calls “expression” on the surface of discourse, and which he wants to call “utopian” in an etymological sense, is, as it were, undecidable as to its truth or falsity (even if, as we have seen, the question of truth arrives with it): but calls for a “discernment” nonetheless. We need (Freud can help us) to

[l]earn to discern not between truth and falsity—both defined in terms of the internal consistency of a system, or of operativeness upon an object of reference—but to discern which of two expressions is there to thwart the gaze (to capture it) and which is there to expand it beyond all limits [*le démesurer*], to give it the invisible to see. (DF, 17/12)

This second possibility (the first, seductive and captivating, possibility is related to the dream-work) is related to artistic work, which can, then, give the invisible to be seen, but cannot exactly *signify* it discursively. Whence some self-deprecating remarks about the book to which this is an introduction (*Discours, figure* itself, then), just because it is a book, still too attached to signifying this non-signifiable dimension of figure-as-truth:

Here yet again, it is not a question here of letting the figure do its thing in words according to its own play, but rather of wanting the words to *say* the preeminence of the figure. This book still wants to *signify* the other of signification. It still wants, wants too much, one is still only the last man and the space of this book is no more than baroque. (DF, 18/13)

And this leads to the thought that I’ve been approaching, and that I want to say is something of the matrix-figure of all of Lyotard’s work, the seeing things that aren’t exactly there that I mentioned at the outset. Signifying the other of signification, i.e. the *sens* that shows up in “expression,” loses, in signifying, what it signifies:

Meaning is present as absence of signification. Yet signification seizes it (and it can, for everything can be said), and meaning is exiled to the border of the new speech act. [You see this is already the logic of “presentation” as it will be formulated over a decade later in *Le diffèrend*.] That is the death drive [earlier Lyotard has said that the death-drive dictates a rule (his words) such that the unity of a discourse is always pushed back and forbidden, whence the impossibility of *theory*, the refusal of philosophy as theory that puzzled us for a while because theory was precisely our watchword, in the 70s and 80s, for revolutionizing the academy], always embroiled in Eros-Logos. Constructing meaning is never anything other than deconstructing signification. No model can be assigned to this evasive configuration. (DF, 19/14)

Something of this “evasive configuration” can be found in all of Lyotard’s thinking, from early to late. The notorious and difficult figure of the “libidinal band,” in *Economie libidinale*, for example, supposedly generated by a kind of random spinning and displacement of the oppositional bar of conceptual distinction, occupies in that book a place analogous to that occupied by “figure” in this earlier work. The “unpresentable,” as I mentioned at the outset, takes that place in the “postmodern” writings. (More conceptually acutely, perhaps, “presentation” *itself* takes that place in *Le diffèrend*, where, you will remember, the thought is that a phrase presents a universe but cannot present that presentation in the universe presented: presentation as event is the unpresentable,³ just as we just saw *sens* in its signification exiled to the next effort of signification, and so on indefinitely, this being why there is no end of history, for example, and also why there is always something still to present, no Last Word or Last Judgment ...). And in the late work (by which I mean broadly the work from

the late 80s and 90s), that place is occupied primarily by the notion of childhood or infancy, *infantia*. Just as in *Discours, figure*, where the point is not to bring out and exhibit “figure” to the clear view of theory or knowledge (that being *ex hypothesi* impossible, just as—in one of the book’s examples—lateral vision cannot by definition be brought into focus without losing itself as lateral (DF, 159/155))—just as with figure in *Discours, figure*, then, infancy in this late work is less a state, still less a period of life that is to be brought to presence, as it were, and more a mute (or almost mute) accompaniment or lining of all my more adult-seeming utterances, accessible always only indirectly or laterally, inventively, “artistically,” in “writing.” Just as my discourse is more or less secretly inhabited by figures (or at least by the dimension of the figural), whether I like it or not; just as my sentences, in presenting their universes, involve events of presentation not themselves presented in the universes presented (but without which events no sentence would ever present any universe whatsoever), so my “adult” talk here is carried by, and conceals, a “childish” dimension that it is the later Lyotard’s effort to bring out, or to which it attempts to “bear witness,” as in the early eighties we were enjoined to “bear witness to the differend,” with the later thought that that witnessing is inevitably marked by a kind of failing, falsity or “treachery” (Lyotard’s word).⁶ *Discours, figure* more or less unrepresentably presents the matrix for all these rich configurations of one complex thought, still to be fully deployed.

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NOTES

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1971, 9-23; translated by Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon as *Discourse, Figure*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 3-19. Further references will be first to the French edition and subsequently to the translation, and given in the text, in the form DF, 9-23/3-19. I have occasionally modified the translation in the light of my own understanding of Lyotard's text.
2. The bulk of what follows is excerpted from my article "Figure Discourse." *Contemporary French Civilization* 35:1 (2011), 53-72. My thanks to the editors for giving permission to reprint parts of that text here.
3. See Jean-François Lyotard, "On a Hyphen" in J.-F. Lyotard and Eberhard Gruber, *The Hyphen: Between Judaism and Christianity*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1999, 13-27.
4. See the note in *Discourse, figure*, page 398, which does however make a very valid point about indirection and obliquity.
5. See for example *Le différend*. Paris: Minuit, 1983, §114.
6. See Jean-François Lyotard, *L'inhumain*. Paris: Galilée, 1988, 215: "le témoin est un traître" are the last words of the book.