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Praesentia Sublimis: Studies in the Differend

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PRAESENTIA SUBLIMIS: STUDIES IN THE DIFFEREND

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

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Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism

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of the requirements for the degree of
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Abstract

Interrogating the notion of the *differend*, taken from Jean-François Lyotard's book of the same name, in which a wrong occurs along with the impossibility of its representation as a wrong, this thesis attempts to rearticulate the relationship between the distant and heterogeneous theories dealing with a supposedly common subject matter: namely, the sublime. The sublime as it is taken up in the rhetorical pedagogy of Longinus, the transcendental aesthetic of Immanuel Kant, and the postmodern theory of Jean-François Lyotard refuses to yield a shared dimension that could bind together these major moments of thought. There are sublimes, it seems, rather than a single sublime. Against this, I contend that the thought of these three figures all constitute a site for a *differend* involving that which is both singular and irreducible in its happening *here* and *now* and therefore always escapes representation: the event of presentation as such.

Keywords

The Sublime, Longinus, Rhetoric, Time, Memory, Jean-François Lyotard, the Differend, Immanuel Kant, Presentation, Post-Structuralism.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Preface.....	1
Chapter 1	11
Chapter 2.....	36
Chapter 3.....	62
Conclusion	84
Bibliography	87
Curriculum Vitae	89

Preface

I

Beneath the humorous and self-deprecating tone of the preface to Jean-François Lyotard's *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, his little “reading dossier” with which one can “talk about the book’ without having read it,”¹ and despite the perhaps ironic use of taxonomic divisions to hang, draw, and quarter his own work—as it can be nothing other than a traitor to his own cause—there remains a grave syncopation that interrupts the playful *résumé*, as when Lyotard plainly tells us: “the time has come to philosophize.”² For Lyotard, philosophy is to be held apart from “theory” with its accompanying “weariness” and “miserable slackening,”³ yet he never elaborates on this distinction, leaving it as a somewhat enigmatic pairing. To better understand this distinction Lyotard makes between philosophy and theory, perhaps an elementary and slightly pedantic etymological exercise is in order: theory, coming from Greek *theōréō* (to look at, to view) and *theōrós* (spectator), connotes the visionary, the hundred-eyed *Argus Panoptes* that sees all and misses nothing; while philosophy, as is well known, is enamoured with its beloved (*phílos*) wisdom (*sophía*). But while love can continue in the face of a certain absence of the beloved through a lingering emotion or feeling (in fact, it often runs smoother this way), vision is rendered impotent when there is nothing to be seen. For this

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xiv.

² *Ibid.*, xiii.

³ *Ibid.*

reason, Lyotard's *The Differend* could be read as a love-letter to that which cannot be represented but only felt: the state of the *differend*.

As a *felt* blankness or vacuity, the *differend* is inextricably bound to a certain sense of anticipation or expectation. Lyotard writes: "The differend is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be."⁴ Lyotard's use of "must" in this instance should be noted. It is not the must of necessity but rather the must of obligation, and therefore the phrasing of the *differend* is not a marginal endeavor within philosophy but rather constitutes its properly ethical dimension. It is philosophy at its most just. This is because "in the differend, something 'asks' to be put into phrases, and suffers from the wrong of not being able to be put into phrases right away."⁵ Yet, we must also linger over Lyotard's use of the word "wrong" in relation to the *differend*. In contradistinction to what Lyotard calls a "damage,"—that is, a harm, impairment, or disavowal that, through its representation, entails the possibility of restitution—a wrong is:

a damage [dommage] accompanied by the loss of the means to prove the damage. This is the case if the victim is deprived of life, or of all his or her liberties, or of the freedom to make his or her ideas or opinions public, or simply of the right to testify to the damage, or even more simply if the testifying phrase is itself deprived of authority (Nos. 24-27). In all of these cases, to the privation constituted by the damage there is added the

⁴ Ibid, 13.

⁵ Ibid.

impossibility of bringing it to the knowledge of others, and in particular to the knowledge of a tribunal.⁶

Despite the acknowledged anthropomorphism of the legalistic term employed here, Lyotard maintains that in facing the “wrong” of the *differend*, a task not merely belonging to philosophy but one shared by all attempts at just thinking in general, is both “to recognize what remains to be phrased” and “to institute idioms which do not yet exist.”⁷ Feeling that something remains to be said, the philosopher must attempt to phrase the *differend* despite its seeming impossibility to thought.

Returning to the use of “must,” both in my own and Lyotard’s formulation of the task of philosophy, it must be repeated that this word signals here not a necessity but an obligation, a confusion that Lyotard quite rightly warns us to be aware of. Yet the distance between these is precisely where the *differend* finds its place of emergence. Lyotard writes: “First of all, it is necessary to link onto a phrase that happens, there is no possibility of not linking onto it. Second, to link is necessary; how to link is contingent.”⁸ In any given instance of a phrasing, because of the diachronic flow of time, another phrase must necessarily follow, even if what follows is a silence (a silence can be a refusal, an incapability, an astonishment and itself will be subsequently followed—or “linked” onto—by a phrase which must necessarily follow: “Did you hear what I said?”; “He must be stupid”; etc.). However, the rules which govern the movement from phrase to phrase

⁶ Ibid, 5.

⁷ Ibid, 13.

⁸ Ibid, 29.

are open to variation. It is in this distance between the necessary and the contingent that what Lyotard calls “genres of discourse” make themselves apparent and give rise to states of the *differend*. Neither wholly belonging to the desires of particular interlocutors nor to an autonomous language as such, each genre of discourse carries within it a singular *telos* or finality that determines certain tendencies or inclinations in the concatenation of phrases. Giving an example, Lyotard writes: “Genres of discourse determine stakes, they submit phrases from different regimens to a single finality: the question, the example, the argument, the narration, the exclamation are in forensic rhetoric the heterogeneous means of persuading.”⁹ Because the finality that belongs to a genre of discourse is incompatible and in competition with those of every other genre, *differends* arise because the rules governing the tendency of phrasing belonging to one must necessarily be chosen over another, “because only one of them can happen (be ‘actualized’) at a time.”¹⁰

II

Yet the conflict between competing genres of discourse is only one type (if one wants to use such a word) of *differend*, albeit one that dominates the book bearing its name. But as Rodolphe Gasché is apt to point out, the lack of a clear differentiation between different types of the *differend* by Lyotard constitutes an unresolved problem.¹¹ Let us take up an instance of the *differend* that holds a prominent place within the text,

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Rodolphe Gasché, “Saving the Honor of Thinking,” in *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*, ed. Claire Nouvet, Zrinka Stahuljak, and Kent Still (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 37.

one which Lyotard returns to time and time again: the Holocaust. In the conflict which arises between competing heterogeneous genres of discourse and their respective finalities, a *differend* emerges between the testimony of the victim (whether it is through silence or impassioned speech) and the logic of the Holocaust denier. Each follows a different set of rules regarding the object or event being discussed—that is, each is phrased within a different genre of discourse—and only one of those may be deemed legitimate and guide subsequent phrase instances. But the event of the Holocaust also exemplifies another type of *differend*. In an essay on Lyotard and the *differend*, Jacob Rogozinski identifies “two figures of the wrong, two versions of silence, two modes of necessity.”¹² The first belongs to the *differend* discussed above, one that is forced by the necessity of phrasing and the arbitrary selection of one genre’s tendency of phrasing over another: “. . . the inevitable discarding of the possible for the real, the impossibility of ‘saying everything.’”¹³ The second intimates the cessation of linkage, “[pleading] in the name of uniqueness, of a *power to phrase* each time unique and threatened with interruption . . . when the very possibility of linkage is menaced.”¹⁴ For Rogozinski, this second type of *differend* is exemplified by nothing other than the Holocaust. But the Holocaust can stand in for yet another *differend*—another wrong—that, while acknowledged and discussed by Lyotard, is relegated to a minor position within the text. What is striking about this instance of the *differend* is that it does not reside so much between the different genres of discourse but rather resides at the heart of every genre of

¹² Jacob Rogozinski, “Lyotard: Differend, Presence,” *L’esprit créateur* 31, no. 1 (1991): 110.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

discourse, one that perhaps even calls for the transition from one genre to another. While Rogozinski emphasizes the intrusive aspect of the second type of *differend*, characterizing it as an “interruption,” this third *differend* is much more obscure precisely because it is pervasive and ubiquitous. Indeed, it would perhaps be more accurate to say that this *differend* evades notions of beginning and ending—and therefore interruption. This is the *differend* of the event of *presentation as such*.

In order to understand this type of *differend*, we must first return to a component of Lyotard’s thinking that has been thus far left unexplained: the phrase. For Lyotard, the phrase appears to be the minimal unit of thought constituting what could be described as a First Philosophy of Phrasing (Lyotard notes that “to doubt” that one phrases is nevertheless a phrase along with a refusal to phrase: there is no “non-phrase”). Each phrase belongs to a particular “phrase regimen” which includes the syntactic and grammatical rules that govern its construction, regimens such as the denotative, the ostensive, the interrogative, etc. However, it should be noted that, despite the lexicon used to describe the phrase and the act of phrasing, the phrase neither belongs exclusively to language—either written or spoken—as it is commonly understood nor does it belong to humans as their properly defining feature: “A wink, a shrugging of the shoulder, a tapping of the foot, a fleeting blush, or an attack of tachycardia can be phrases. –And the wagging of a dog’s tail, the perked ears of a cat? –And a tiny speck to the West rising upon the horizon of the sea?”¹⁵ What all phrases share is that each one entails what

¹⁵ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 70.

Lyotard calls a “universe”—that is, the four instances of addressor, addressee, a referent, and a sense—or, better still, that each phrase *presents* a universe.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to the presentation of a phrase. What escapes the presentation of any phrase, no matter its regimen, is the presentation of its own presentation: in other words, the event of presentation as such. If one were to simplify, the presentation of a phrase would appear to be the veritable *being* of the phrase as it happens or occurs. Lyotard, however, objects to this denomination: “Could the presentation entailed by a phrase be called *Being*? But it is *one* presentation, or what in a phrase-case is the case. Being would be a case, an occurrence, the ‘fact’ that it happens to ‘fall,’ that is ‘comes running’ (*Fall, occurrence*). Not Being, but one being, one time.”¹⁶ Presentation is not the general being of a phrase but is rather the irreducible singularity and heterogeneity of an event that occurs at this specific instant and no other. The event of presentation can itself be presented but only through a later phrase that follows it and makes of the first an instance of its universe, such as a referent, and therefore the irreducible singularity of the event of presentation as such is nullified; its *hic et nunc*—or here and now—is irretrievably lost. In this way, the event of presentation as such becomes a locus for the *differend*: not only is the irreducible *hic et nunc* of presentation as such wronged by the subsequent phrase that necessarily drains the event of its presence by virtue of coming after but the initial phrase also has no recourse to presenting the event of presentation through its own means. It becomes the unpresentable.

III

¹⁶ Ibid.

As that which eludes re-presentation and brings us to the limits of thought and understanding, the event of presentation parallels another notion bearing similar traits: the sublime. Derived from the latin *sublimis* as that which brings us up to (*sub-*) the threshold (*limen*) of things, the sublime bears the connotations of blockage, difficulty, even impossibility. Yet, if the *differend* of presentation as such—that is, that a phrase cannot present its own event of unfolding in the here and now—is a necessary part of all phrasing, then the question of why we make recourse to the slightly withered concept of the sublime remains to be answered. Is the sublime a type of phrase regimen, a way of speaking in which presentation as such can emerge? Or rather is the sublime a genre of discourse with a finality to phrase that which cannot be phrased: a *telos* of presenting the event of presentation as such? Perhaps, but if this is the case, then as a genre of discourse it holds no particular privilege regarding the other genres. As Lyotard continually stresses, we lack a universal rule to preside over the others and to validate the privileging of one genre over another. The sublime, then, is not a genre of genres. Even to attempt to compile the range of thought and art suspended under the heading of the sublime into a homogeneous and consistent field would appear somewhat suspect. Indeed, the sublime—in the singular—is something of a misnomer; perhaps it would be more accurate to say the sublimes: “because the singular calls forth the plural (as the plural does the singular) and because the singular and the plural are together already the plural.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Ibid, xii.

Nevertheless, there does seem to be a common strand that runs through the work of the three figures I have assembled in these pages: Longinus, Immanuel Kant, and Jean-François Lyotard. What they offer us is what I would like to call the *thought of the sublime* or, perhaps more sharply, *sublime thought*. Bracketing the varied definitions and attributes ascribed to the concept of the sublime by these individuals themselves, we can use the sublime to denominate a site or locus where the *differend* of presentation as such comes to the fore, and this word can then be used to describe the very thought of those who think at the limits. Whether rendering *hýpsous*, or the “high,” of rhetorical language teachable through a grounding in *phantasia* as in Longinus, enacting a temporal displacement of the futural Ideas of reason onto the formless instant of the present as in Kant, or obliging thought through the phrasing of the philosophical interrogative as in Lyotard, the *hic et nunc* of presentation has a undeniable presence within the work of these three figures. In all cases, they *succumb* to the problems associated with the *differend* of presentation as such. As it is a moment of irreducible singularity, the event of presentation comes to the surface only to be re-submerged through an inability of all thought, from its roots given to us in antiquity to our contemporary moment, to do justice to presentation as such. Sublime thought signifies a certain *failure*, the ruination of thought, and this thesis is a surveying of those crumbled structures.

However, the *sublime thought* is not merely thought’s tomb but is also paradoxically its bower of vitality. If the thought of the sublime remains contemporaneous and relevant to us now, it is only through this tension residing within it, a tension resulting from another force that presses against its failure. The thought of Longinus, Kant, and Lyotard all share moments of breaching in which they seemingly

offer manners, as opposed to methods, of approaching the event of presentation as such. Giving us new ways of remembering, new ways to orientate our thought, and new ways to fabulate, these three moments of sublime thought bring thinking in proximity to that which is utterly alien to it. This paradox of the failure and the success of thought regarding the event of presentation is what makes them neither failures nor successes but rather aporias. As aporetic moments of thought, they cannot be said to resolve the *differend* of presentation as such by in fact presenting it. But what can be affirmed is that, in their aporetic and irresolvable state, they can at least *testify* to it, to show that there is something that remains to be thought. For this reason, sublime thought, despite the seeming vacuity of the adjective, is essential to the task of thinking the *differend*, a task that remains the only way to “save the honor of thinking.”¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid.

Chapter 1

I

The genre of discourse known as rhetoric is marked by an idiosyncratic confrontation of phrases, an agonistic or dialogic tort-retort unfolding¹⁹—or, to use Lyotard’s lexicon, linking—emphasizing the interplay and interchange of addressor and addressee. Yet, as we noted in the introduction, genres of discourse are identified by the singular finality or goal that determines this unfolding of phrases, the tendency of one phrase type to be followed by another, so that this finality can be accomplished. For the rhetorical genre of discourse, as it was known in Classical Greek tradition, the finality that satisfies the unfolding of phrases and allows the apposite succession of other genres of discourse is nothing other than *persuasion*, and only a signal of victory can herald the advent of this finality. The phrasing of this proclamation can be varied and manifold: in an opponent’s admittance of defeat (whether explicit or implied through his or her silence), in the formal verdict of a judging party, or in the thunderous reaction of spectators. But whether crowned with the laurel leaf or evicted from the podium, both outcomes are the product of the same activity: that of judgment (“I am persuaded: your opening remarks were sound and your argument was well formed”; “I am unconvinced: you begged the question and broke the rule of non-contradiction”). With this passing of judgment, the unfolding of phrases can then transition into other genres of discourse, or

¹⁹ Tort and retort not in the sense of righting a wrong but in the sense of a twisting and re-twisting (or twisting further); *torquēre*.

one can re-enter the rhetorical genre if the judgment itself becomes the referent of further contestation.

The passing of judgment, however, not only takes place in the evaluation of a prior phrase or set of phrases but also takes place in the selection of phrases by the interlocutors themselves. Yet, for all their intertwining, the relationship between rhetoric and judgment remains equivocal. As Aristotle famously writes in his treatise on the topic, “rhetoric then may be defined as the faculty of discovering the possible means of persuasion in reference to any subject whatever. That is why we say that as an art its rules are not applied to any particular definite class of things.”²⁰ A genre of discourse that twists and retwists written and spoken language through a mastery of its protean malleability, rhetoric appears to be the space not in which phrases *undergo* judgment but in which phrases *evade* judgment. Operating within and alongside other genres of discourse, rhetoric infiltrates at the levels of syntax, paratax, and lexis without necessarily interfering with their specific finalities, weaving in and out with minimal disruption. From this, it appears that rhetoric solves the state of the *differend* caused by the finitude of selection discussed above, the *differend* of *either/or*: either this phrase or that phrase, but not both. Instead, Greek rhetoric disposes of the *either/or* for a hidden *and*, approaching Paul de Man’s later formulation of rhetoric as an undecidable instance which “suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration.”²¹ Nevertheless, while it appears as a meta-tactic that is applicable to “any subject

²⁰ Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, trans. John Henry Freese, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926): 1.2.1.

²¹ Paul de Man, “Semiology and Rhetoric,” *Diacritics* 3.3 (October 1973): 29-30.

whatever,” rhetoric continues to be bound to the *telos* of persuasion, and judgment is still required in the selection and validation of which phrase is “best suited” to sway one’s opinion, despite its clandestine importation of foreign meaning. The Aristotelian tradition of rhetoric nourishes us with a poisoned well in which Lyotard’s notion of the *differend* is only reaffirmed and reproduced.

Despite its enduring influence, the Aristotelian tradition does not stand monolithic in the history of rhetoric. Other, more obscure figures can be apprehended in the shadowy field of the Greek rhetorical tradition, and one such figure gives us a rhetoric that paradoxically goes beyond rhetoric itself, as least in its Aristotelian guise: Longinus and the origins of the sublime. This first extant writing on the sublime comes from a relatively obscure and, at least in our contemporary moment, little-read rhetorical treatise written anywhere from the first to the third century of the common era entitled *Perī Hýpsous*, or, as it is more commonly known, *On the Sublime*. While the treatise has been praised as a rhetorical masterpiece on its own (Alexander Pope’s famous estimation of Longinus, “Whose own Example strengthens all his Laws, / And Is himself that great Sublime he Draws”²²), its primary focus is on teaching the art of rhetoric—the pedagogical strain within the rhetorical tradition. Its pedagogical value, however, is “extremely problematic,”²³ a fact supported by the series of lacunae that surround the work. Written at the request of a friend, Terentian, the treatise often assumes the intimacy and elliptical character of the epistolary form. Moreover, the treatise was also partially

²² Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, ed. Maynard Mack (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), lines 678-9.

²³ Philip Shaw, *The Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 12.

written in response to an earlier work by a person named Caecilius, which is now lost. Wanting to supplement, and not repeat, the work of Caecilius, Longinus often leaves much unexplained and undefined. Even the sublime itself, *hýpsous* or “the high,” merely described as an elevated state of language, remains largely distant from understanding, like a nimbus cloud floating “high” above us.

The certain aloofness and obscurity that surrounds the “high,” rather than indicating a certain carelessness on the part of Longinus, should perhaps be seen as a sign of difficulty or conflict within the treatise. Despite any echoes of the Aristotelian tradition that persist in his writing, Longinus is quick to stress that it is irreducibly different from its counter-part, writing in the first chapter of the treatise: “For the effect of genius is not to persuade the audience but rather to transport them out of themselves. Invariably what inspires wonder, with its power of amazing us, always prevails over what is merely convincing and pleasing.”²⁴ The Longinian sublime, then, offers a mode of rhetoric that explicitly rejects the Aristotelian view that a perfected use of language entails a “convincing” or persuasive outcome. As Ned O’Gorman argues, this unshackling from “the tradition of character and persuasion” allows rhetoric to enter a state of “autonomy” for the first time.²⁵ I would amend O’Gorman’s declaration slightly so that the end securing the rhetoric of the sublime becomes not absent but rather indeterminate. What is being dismissed in Longinus’ treatise is rhetoric’s traditional goal, “to persuade,” which

²⁴ Longinus, “On the Sublime,” trans. W.H. Fyfe, *Poetics, On the Sublime, On Style* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1.4.

²⁵ Ned O’Gorman, “Longinus’s Sublime Rhetoric, or How Rhetoric Came into its Own,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34.2 (2004): 75.

is replaced by the ability of language “to transport”[*ekstasis*].²⁶ Language no longer has an embedded terminus but is now propelled by an indeterminate agitation, a swelling and heaving of language without harbor or lighthouse in sight: movement as opposed to destination. But perhaps more than movement, the Longinian sublime strives towards a certain immediacy, a presence that is not in need of any persuasion to validate it. If the thought of Longinus is indeed *sublime thought*, it is because the *ékstasis* of the Longinian sublime unknowingly strives towards the event of presentation as such.

The *hic et nunc*—the here and now—of presentation is irreducible and incommensurable to every genre of discourse, including the twinned genres of rhetoric and pedagogy that characterize Longinus’ treatise. Longinus writes to teach us lessons, to teach us how to achieve the immediacy of “high” language, to press towards the event of presentation as such, but to do so the enigmatic process of transport, or *ekstasis*, must be circumscribed by comprehension and understanding. In the conflict that arises between the pedagogical impetus to unveil and illuminate and the occulted character of presentation as such, the *differend* of presentation becomes activated. Yet, for the pedagogical genre of discourse to fulfill its finality or goal, the event of presentation must be presented, exhibited, examined. But as we have mentioned already in the preface, the *differend* of presentation as such belongs to an impossibility or limitation inherent within the act of presentation itself. As Lyotard argues, every phrase “entails” a presentation. That is, every event that is capable of bearing significance gives us four necessary instances of an addressor, an addressee, a sense, and a referent (“Get up!”: a parent gives

²⁶ Longinus, 1.4.

their child a command to change their current position or state; a comet streaks across the sky: something or someone—God?—signals to a group of people—a nation, a sect?—the spiritual or moral state of that group and that this state is one of sickness), but this event of presentation, the advent of the irreducibly singular occurrence of the phrase, can never be known as such because presentation cannot present itself simultaneously with the presentation of its instances. Engaging in a moment of sophistry, Lyotard elucidates this point: “What is not presented is not. The presentation entailed by a phrase is not presented, it is not. Or: Being is not. One could say that when an entailed presentation is presented, it is not an entailed but a situated presentation. Or: Being grasped as an existent is non-Being.”²⁷ The presentation of the phrase, then, can only be known after it has occurred by way of a later phrase that comes after, retroactively determining it as “presented presentation.”²⁸ It is in the distance between an “entailed presentation” and a “situated presentation” that the *differend* arises because the irreducible *hic et nunc* of presentation as such is missed. Not only missed, however, but also transformed as it is situated. In this moment of Longinus’ pedagogical situated presentation, presentation as such, the “high,” must become something other than what it is: it must become an image, a sight, a vision before the eyes. The teaching image that haunts the word: *phantasia*.

II

Casting shadows in the texts of both Plato and Aristotle, *phantasia* is one of the spectres of Greek thought. And for this reason, it is not surprising that it also finds its

²⁷ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 77.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 71.

way into many texts within the rhetorical tradition, such as those of Dionysius of Halicarnassus and, of course, Longinus. The word *phantasia* carries a strong association with the visual field, belonging to a family of Greek words including *phantāzomai* and *phainō*, which circulate around events of appearing, unveiling, or showing, and because of this, it is a word that provokes a deep suspicion towards its relation to the true, or lack thereof. A will-o'-the-wisp within works of Plato such as his *Republic*, *Sophist*, and *Theaetetus*, *phantasia* often appears in shifting relations to *alētheia* or *doxa*. What remains fairly constant, however, is that “Plato regards images and appearances, and any part of the mind that deals with them, as liable to produce error and illusion.”²⁹ In contradistinction to its negative Platonic associations, on the other hand, *phantasia* can also be employed to denote the integral relation between thought and the world around us via visualization, as evidenced by Aristotle’s *On the Soul*, *Rhetoric*, and *On Memory*. It is this latter Aristotelian usage of *phantasia* that Longinus invokes in his attempt to *present* the immediate and irreducible event of presentation as such and situate it within his pedagogical treatise.

In order to more fully understand the implications of Longinus’ presentation through the inheritance of *phantasia*, however, we must first disinter Aristotle’s employment of the word and his understanding of visualization in general and bring it before the mind’s eye, so to speak. Aristotle’s main treatment of *phantasia* is found in the third chapter of Book Three of his *On the Soul*. While explicating the *dynameis*—or, as they are commonly translated, faculties of the soul—Aristotle attempts to delineate the

²⁹ Anne Sheppard, *The Poetics of Phantasia: Imagination in Ancient Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 5-6.

specific capabilities of every living entity and culminates with the supposedly unparalleled faculties of human beings. Here, *phantasia* appears as a faculty of the soul and is traditionally translated as “imagination”—rather than a more literal “image” or “appearance”—and seems to occupy a position between sense perception and rational thought: “For imagination is different from either perceiving or discursive thinking, though it is not found without sensation, or judgment without it.”³⁰ As “that in virtue of which an image arises for us,”³¹ *phantasia* is still strongly associated with images, but the emphasis is somewhat different. As Anne Sheppard comments: “For Aristotle *phantasia* remains closely linked to ‘what appears’ and is the power to deal with appearances rather than those appearances themselves.”³² *Phantasia*, then, is not itself a spectral image but is rather a congenial faculty of the human soul that mediates between sense perceptions and rational thought through the production of images. In this role as mediator, *phantasia* holds an eminently important position regarding thinking in general, for Aristotle stresses that “the soul never thinks without an image”³³ and elsewhere remarks that without *phantasia* “intellectual activity is impossible.”³⁴ With this centrality of the phantasmal image, the edges of seeing and thinking begin to overlap.

³⁰ Aristotle, “On the Soul,” trans. J.A. Smith, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 3.3.427b.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 3.3.427a.

³² Sheppard, 7.

³³ Aristotle, “On the Soul,” 3.7.431a.

³⁴ Aristotle, “Memory and Reminiscence,” trans. J.I. Beare, *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 449b-450a.

While *phantasia* and its production of images are integral to the occurrence of thought, the position of *phantasia* as a mediating faculty places it at the very heart of what prevents immediacy. Yet immediacy does seem possible for Aristotle but only in the use of visualization in artistic practice, and he uses an alternate lexicon to designate this immediacy. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle dictates to the aspiring playwright: “One should construct plots, and work them out in diction, with the material as much as possible in the mind’s eye. In this way, by seeing things most vividly, as if present at the actual events, one will discover what is apposite and not miss contradictions.”³⁵ The tragedians’ efforts to bring forth the most intelligible and affective work of art is largely dependent on the activity of visualization, an activity that bears an unmistakable sense of immediacy as if the playwright were “present at the actual events.” Paralleling the activity of the playwright, Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* indicates a similar aspect of visualization on the part of the spectators as well: “And since sufferings are pitiable when they appear close at hand . . . it follows that those who contribute to the effect by gestures, voice, dress, and dramatic action generally, are more pitiable; for they make the evil appear close at hand, setting it before our eyes as either future or past.”³⁶ What connects these two excerpts—specifically the “mind’s eye” of the first and “before our eyes” of the second—is a shared phrasing in Greek: *pro ommatōn* or a bringing-before-the-eyes. Sheppard convincingly argues that due to the frequency with which it appears and the consistency with which it is applied, *pro ommatōn* operates for Aristotle “almost as a technical term for

³⁵ Aristotle, “Poetics,” trans. Stephen Halliwell, *Poetics, On the Sublime, On Style* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 17.1455b.

³⁶ Aristotle, “Art of Rhetoric,” 2.8.1386a.

visualization.³⁷ Because both the creator and the audience engage in the activity of *pro ommatōn*, the shared visualization creates a sense of immediacy despite the sinews of language that are suspended between them. The image of the artist touches the image of the audience, ignorant of the distance between them.

With these two aspects of Aristotelian thought in place, the mediating activity of *phantasia* necessary for thought and the seemingly immediate presence of *pro ommatōn*, we can now return to Longinus and the rhetoric of the sublime. Facing the irreducible *hic et nunc* of presentation as such, the pedagogical goal of Longinus' treatise founders on its necessary belatedness. Yet, Longinus makes a novel manoeuver to overcome this impasse and welds Aristotle's *phantasia* together with *pro ommatōn*. In an early passage from his treatise, Longinus writes:

Weight, grandeur, and urgency in writing are very largely produced, dear young friend, by the use of 'visualizations' (*phantasiai*). That at least is what I call them; others call them 'image productions.' For the term *phantasia* is applied in general to an idea which enters the mind from any source and engenders speech [*logos*], but the word has now come to be used predominantly of passages where, inspired by strong emotion, you seem to see what you describe and bring it vividly before the eyes of your audience.³⁸

³⁷ Sheppard, 23.

³⁸ Longinus, 15.1.

Here, Longinus delineates two potential meanings of *phantasia* that can be mapped onto Aristotle's treatment of images and visualization discussed above. One allows speech, reason and discursive thought to come forth and enables them to be exchanged or communicated. In other words, it also allows something to be taught, to enter the field of pedagogy. The other, meanwhile, belongs to the realm of visualization in the addressor and addressee, carrying with it an implied sense of immediacy. Rather than explicitly choose which definition will be mobilized in his treatise, Longinus leaves the role of *phantasia* ambiguously unresolved. Yet, his pedagogical goal to teach how to reach the heights of language, the event of presentation as such, necessitates that he paradoxically keep the mediate and the immediate together. Longinus must transform the image into an icon of thought.

This condensation of immediacy and the mediate in Longinus' use of *phantasia* is secured through careful shiftings throughout the text. The first can be perceived in the placement of Longinus' discussion of *phantasia* within the text. Although it is discussed as if it were a rhetorical figure, the notion of *phantasia* arises during an explication of the congenial sources of the sublime rather than along with the other typical rhetorical figures, such as metaphor and amplification. Because its nature is left ambiguous, the figurativity of *phantasia* is thrown into doubt altogether,³⁹ and in separating *phantasia* from the other figurative techniques, Longinus is able to posit *phantasia* as a ground from which to launch his pedagogical goal to teach the techniques of presenting the event of presentation as such. The figure that is not a figure, *phantasia*, is then charged with a

³⁹ Mats Malm, "On the Technique of the Sublime," *Comparative Literature* 52.1 (Winter 2000): 5.

pedagogical valence through its ability to “engender speech.” Longinus notes that unlike the rhetoric of the elevated language and its use of *logos*, instrumental music does not appeal to our *dianoia*—that is, our reason or reflective thought.⁴⁰ Rather than being a phrase that is incompatible with thinking, the elevated phrasing advocated by Longinus must engage thought and therefore be able to be to enter the pedagogical genre of discourse, “not as a mere imposition of mental force . . . but as a powerfully charged *arousal* and heightening of other minds’ thoughts.”⁴¹ With the immediate yet mediating, non-figural figure of *phantasia*, Longinus is able to present the event of presentation, but as a vision, a landscape: *ut pictura poesis*.

In this appeal to *phantasia* and the primacy of the image—as the fountainhead of rhetorical pedagogy—to teach one to phrase the highest, the grandest, the most distant in language, Longinus makes the shift from the entailed presentation to a situated presentation. Unable to teach that which will not allow itself to be taught, Longinus forces the event of presentation as such to conform to the categories of visualization and *phantasia*, but these categories can only give form to presentation as such by merely simulating the *hic et nunc* of the event, by simulating its irreducible immediacy. Michel Deguy finds this manoeuvre encapsulated in the image of *hýpsous* itself, the high:

The problematic of (*re*)*ascension* or ‘the origin’ schematizes or figures itself in accordance with the image of the *high*, the return to the source, the

⁴⁰ Longinus, 39.2-4.

⁴¹ Stephen Halliwell, *Between Ecstasy and Truth: Interpretations of Greek Poetics from Homer to Longinus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 340.

(re)unification of the manifold . . . Unity, anteriority, and height—or synthesis, a prioricity, and elevation—are held together, maintained as conceivable, by the configuration which compares them reciprocally: schematization by images.⁴²

To call the treatise itself “on the high” is not only an intimation of its true object of study, the presentation of presentation within the rhetorical genre of discourse, but is also a prelude to Longinus’ pedagogical situating: the determination of presentation as such within the realm of visualization and the image to unveil and render teachable its nebulous, irreducible, and occulted aspects. There is a presentation of presentation that happens, but as a situated presentation, one that always comes too late, the tyranny of the image arises, becoming the image of the beginning of thought and the end of thought. The situated presentation of *phantasia* allows contact between minds but disallows contact between the mind and the event of presentation as such, and for this reason, we share a commonality in our feeble recollection of the event of presentation. Despite being called the “high”, the true *phantasia* of Longinus’ sublime thought is this image: a river. And every word that passes from our lips is a drink from *Lethe*.

III

There is a certain kinship that allows the river *Lethe* to flow through the landscape of *phantasia*. Despite the supposed *enargeia* (clarity) and panoptic *hypsous* (height) of the phantasmal images of elevated language, Longinus’ pedagogical presentation, his

⁴² Michel Deguy, “The Discourse of Exaltation,” in *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 14.

situated presentation of presentation as such, is susceptible to deterioration: images can become obscure; lines and folds can create divisions in the otherwise integral and unified composition; certain spots are worn away or crumbling so what was previously there can no longer be identified. One can only say that *there was something happening*.⁴³ Yet, this process of deterioration is also apt in describing the work of *Lethe* upon the mind, as memories likewise become worn, tattered, and ruined. But there exists more than a mere likeness between the *phantasia* of Longinus' treatise and the disappearance of memory; rather, the two are inextricably bound to one another. While Longinus situates presentation as such in the guise of an image or appearance, he can only do so *after* the event of presentation, and so the ostensive and demonstrative thrust of rhetorical pedagogy must struggle with the movement of time in its attempt to present what came before. Longinus' pedagogical moment then—and perhaps every pedagogical moment—is a process of remembrance or recall in the face of forgetfulness.

Paradoxically, however, it is the very movement of recall—so essential to Longinus' pedagogical presentation of an originary phantasmal image—that constitutes the oblivion and forgetfulness in the attempt to think the event of presentation as such. The Lethic dimension of Longinus' presentation arrives exactly at the moment that he attempts to posit *phantasia* as the moment of presentation as such and which later “engenders” speech and allows its own reconstitution. In this moment of pedagogical presentation, the event of presentation is situated through a determination of its origins: as the phantasmal image of thought. This presentation in Longinus' pedagogical treatise,

⁴³ Recognition without identification, or perhaps recognition *despite* identification, seems essential to thinking the *differend* as Lyotard describes it.

however, necessarily forgets certain presuppositions that are necessary for the positing of an origin. Lyotard is instructive in this regard: writing on the seemingly universal character of the phrase “I doubt” as the foundation or first moment of the Cartesian Method, he notes that “to verify that *I doubt* or any other phrase presumed to be the first in position is in fact there, one must at least presuppose the ordinal series of events, from which the predicate *first* derives its sense. . . . it is succession itself which is already presupposed.”⁴⁴ In this way, the following positions in the ordinal series can, if not come before, at least arrive simultaneously with the supposed origin of the series. Following Lyotard’s line of argument, Longinus’ positing of *phantasia* as the event of presentation similarly presupposes the co-arrival of the two terms of the series, *phantasia* and speech, but must necessarily forget this tandem movement in his pedagogical presentation. The same result would happen if we were to invert the series and place speech first in the series, and as a result, we reach a moment of indetermination regarding the event of presentation. The “high,” as presentation as such, is irreducible to either speech or image: the most we can say is that it is *both* speech and image or—and this is more likely—that it is *neither* speech nor image.

The forgetting of co-arrival in the ordinal series, or the paradoxical movement of the second accompanying the first, sounds the distance between the pedagogical genre of discourse and other genres of discourse. While all genres of discourse situate the presentations of the phrases that come before them, the pedagogical genre of discourse cannot function properly without such a gesture: situating presentations is a necessity for

⁴⁴ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 59-60.

the genre in order for it to teach its rule or its “lesson.” This becomes clearer if we first turn to another genre of discourse for the sake of contrast: philosophy. As Lyotard notes, “philosophical discourse has as its rule to discover its rule: its *a priori* is what it has at stake. It is a matter of formulating this rule, which can only be done at the end, if there is an end.”⁴⁵ The philosophical genre of discourse, as it should be properly understood according to Lyotard, is a search, an adventure, a movement of discovery. Like the pedagogical genre, the philosophical genre of discourse involves a strange warping of succession: the beginning must only come at the end, the first is the last. However, in this way they are somewhat like foils to one another. Pedagogical discourse must forego any semblance of forward progression in favor of anamnesis: to recall and posit, if not the origin, then at least what is prior. Teaching must precede discovery; one can only begin anew by returning to what is already known. This is even so when, as in the case of Longinus, one wishes to teach how to return to the irreducible event of presentation as such.

But the lesson that Longinus wants to teach in his treatise, the phantasmal foundation of presentation as such, is not the only one to be found in the text. There are many: unfinished lessons, useless lessons, and even forgotten lessons. The latter are signaled by a passage that perhaps inadvertently or accidentally renders the entirety of the treatise suspect and is a lesson all the more integral for that fact. This lesson is what Michel Deguy baptizes the “solar unity” of the sublime, a unity which unravels

⁴⁵ Ibid, 60.

Longinus' positing of the originary phantasmal image.⁴⁶ Deguy, staring into the sun itself, derives this lesson of Longinus from a well-known excerpt from the treatise.

Longinus writes:

So we find that a figure is always most effective when it conceals the very fact of its being a figure. Sublimity and emotional intensity are a wonderfully helpful antidote against the suspicion that accompanies the use of figures. The artfulness of the trick is no longer obvious in its brilliant setting of beauty and grandeur, and thus avoids all suspicion . . . Much in the same way that dimmer lights vanish in the surrounding radiance of the sun, so an all-embracing atmosphere of grandeur obscures the rhetorical devices.⁴⁷

In this instance, Longinus attempts to reconcile the distance between *physis* and *techne*, but no complete return to an undivided state is possible. Instead, one can only ever obscure the difference between the two, hide the one behind the other so that one merely appears as what it is not. The lesson of this relation finds itself mirrored in Longinus' own pedagogical presentation of the "high" discussed above: the phantasmal image as situating presentation hides the very fact of its artifice through the shimmering of its seemingly immediate intelligibility. What Longinus fails to point out, however, is that the hidden *techne* can also be hidden from those who are using it. And a *techne* hidden from

⁴⁶ Deguy, 17.

⁴⁷ Longinus, 17.2-3.

all is not hidden, properly speaking; rather it is forgotten, dropped into the river *Lethe*: not a hidden but a forgotten art.

Teaching the art of the unteachable, however, requires this moment of oblivion; it cannot be done otherwise. To present the unrepresentable event of presentation for edification and its eventual reconstitution must result in a forgetting of that presentation. Its entailed presentation, its being as a singular occurrence, is replaced with a situated presentation so that it can properly be the object of a lesson or a rule. Deguy posits that the *techne* of *synthesis* undergirds the entirety of the Longinian sublime, “constituting a second beginning, or rather a beginning after ‘the origin,’”⁴⁸ and this is exactly what also undergirds Longinus’ pedagogical attempt: the attempted synthesis of an entailed presentation and a situated presentation. But the attempt to bring the occurring and the situating in as close a proximity as possible obscures the technical and situational maneuvers of presenting presentation as such within the realm of visualization and *phantasia*. This forgotten presentation allows one to teach the art of the “high,” to present its rules and formulations, to create a second *techne* of rhetorical figures and schemas in place of the effaced one that gave birth to them in the first place but at the price of perpetuating the *differend* of presentation as such. It is in this way that the sublime thought of Longinus constitutes what Deguy rightly calls a “lethal event” (*Lethe*).⁴⁹

The mirroring that plays out between the hidden lesson of forgetting and the pedagogical presentation of that sublime provokes a painful realization: the abyss at the

⁴⁸ Deguy, 22.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 22.

heart of truth and knowledge. Much like the operation of metaphor, metonymy, and anthropomorphism in the constitution of truth for Nietzsche, situated presentations are repeated and reiterated until they are forgotten as situated. This is how the pedagogy of the impossible becomes possible: through a continual misrecognition of the past for the now. The irreducible *hic et nunc* of presentation as such is only available to us after it has passed and has appeared within another presentation that is not, and cannot, be the same as the first. And in this misrecognition comes the ever doubling of mis-presentations. In presenting the past as the now, the current phrase in turn cannot present its own happening which can only be caught by a further presentation, and so on and so forth. Yet it is only this way that a teaching can happen. The abysmal relation of *aletheia* to *Lethe* becomes acute: “There must be a *swoning syncopation* in the listener—in all listeners, including the speaker—in order for the rhetorical moment to be *identified* with the moment of natural perfection; a *λανθάνεσθαι*, or ‘over-looking,’ a *λήθη*, as the condition for the utterance of the ‘truth.’”⁵⁰ For presentation as such to be reconciled to thought and to be an object of rhetorical study, it must be forgotten as an event. Forgetting comes first in the series . . . but doesn’t the first presuppose that which comes after? From the never-ending interplay of *Mnemosyne* and *Lethe* an echoing begins to issue from Longinus’ treatise: another lesson awaits us.

IV

In the face of the forgetfulness that accompanies a presented presentation or a situated presentation, there is a certain futility that pervades the attempt to do justice to

⁵⁰ Deguy, 23.

the irreducible singularity of the event of presentation as such and thereby to resolve the state of the *differend* pertaining to it. Justice seemingly becomes an impossibility given the temporal necessity of how presentation as such comes to be known only after the presentation ceases to be an event of the here and now in the transition from an entailed presentation to situated presentation. One can never arrest the loss of memory: forgetting continually takes place in the process of presentation. For this reason, Longinus' pedagogical treatise on the "high" will always be a book of lost memories, as the phantasmal images he posits as its foundation can only appear through the loss of a phrase's own entailed presentation. Likewise, even in the situated presentation of the "high" in terms of visualization, the irreducible singularity of that presentation is similarly lost until another phrase comes to situate that presentation, *ad infinitum*. Phrases are only ever too late. There is something titanic and mythic about this process: Sisyphus rolling the boulder, Orobouros devouring its own tail, a never-ending *opus* or *ergon*.

Despite this pervasive and insidious form of repetition, there is also the sense that in this continual falling into forgetting there is also a certain production or creation that can come in the face of nothingness. Lyotard himself hints at such an economy: "The presentation entailed by a phrase is forgotten by it, plunged into the river Lethe . . . Another phrase pulls it back out and presents it, oblivious to the presentation that it itself entails. Memory is doubled by oblivion. Metaphysics struggles against oblivion, but what is whatever struggles for oblivion called?"⁵¹ The attempt at complete anamnesis is impossible in that amnesia is its condition of possibility, but nevertheless the struggle

⁵¹ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 77.

against oblivion is the metaphysical—and pedagogical—endeavour, the attempt at total recall or remembrance, to bring the forgotten into light. Lyotard suggests that there is an alternative, however obscure it may be: to “struggle for oblivion.” This alternative should not be mistaken for a nihilistic or iconoclastic call-to-arms, but rather should be understood as a shift in emphasis. Here, a distinction in terms is necessary: to struggle *for* oblivion is not to remember the *forgotten* but rather to remember the *forgetting*. While involving a repetition similar to that found in situated presentation, remembering the *forgetting* better preserves the irreducible singularity of presentation as such not through a determining recollecting but through a reverberation of blankness: an indeterminate echo.

This sentiment finds a point of resonance in a particularly well-known definition of the sublime. Engaging in a play of *mise-en-abyme*, Longinus paraphrases—that is, echoes—himself: “Well, elsewhere I have written something like this, ‘Sublimity is the echo [apēchema] of a noble mind.’”⁵² Doubled and repeated, the “high” or event of presentation happens over and over again, perpetuating itself. Yet this continual echoing of *hýpsous* is not merely an empty gesture nor is it the repeated belatedness of situated presentation. Rather, it signals the presence of something that resists situating and belated comprehension. As Longinus himself writes, “For what is truly great bears repeated consideration; it is difficult, nay, impossible, to resist its effect; and the memory of it is stubborn and indelible.”⁵³ An inerasable mark appears on those who strain towards the

⁵² Longinus, 9.2

⁵³ Ibid, 7.3

event of presentation while resisting any attempt at situating it. But this mark is beyond decipherment: it is the mark of an enigma or the enigma as mark. While the forgotten moment of presentation as such can never be retrieved, what is intimated in the echoing and inerascable mark of the “high” is simply that there is forgetting, that forgetting happens, that we forget. In spite of its simplicity, that forgetting happens and that we remember that it does is beyond resolution, situating, comprehension. For this reason, the intimation of forgetting echoes from previous phrases and will reverberate into the phrases that come after it. The remembrance of forgetting will only carry on by leaving an indelible mark: the mark of oblivion.

Because the remembrance of forgetting does not occult oblivion by situating it, does not nullify oblivion but tries to hold onto oblivion and keep it close, it makes the event of presentation as such appear as that which also always escapes the ability to think: death. While remembering the forgotten is a locus of closure, a presentation to be covered over, remembering the forgetting is a threatening openness, looming over us with black wings. As Deguy notes, “Sublime words are words of the end.” Further he writes:

Sublimity at once belongs to the mortal curve and surmounts it, overhangs it tangentially like a remarkable ‘turning point’, a pineal apex where the body is united with and suspends itself in the soul, a utopia of infinitesimal weightlessness as at the labile peak of the highest leap. Nothing remains ‘in the air,’ and the fall away from the sublime is fatal.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Deguy, 9-10.

This seems to be the distinguishing movement of the “high.” Like the remembrance of the forgotten, the only outcome in the remembrance of forgetting is defeat. There is no presentation that is adequate to the occulting and occulted character of forgetting. As such, the pedagogical valence of the treatise is once again thrown into considerable doubt. Are there any lessons to be learned from impossible riddles, unfathomable notions such as that *there is forgetting*?

“Death be not proud.” The impasse of forgetting nevertheless constitutes a teaching, and because of this the impasse passes on: in a sense it passes away. The presentation of forgetting, the testament to oblivion, precisely because it cannot be solved, cannot be unraveled without a determination that must necessarily entail a wrong and give rise to a differend, constitutes the inheritance of pedagogy; it is the lesson of lessons. It is one of the echoes of the “high.” Returning to Deguy once more:

Under certain conditions, defeat with no tomorrow is not defeat. The “ruinous” relation is reversed, something surmounts the “end” by making it pass on and serve as a recommencement: a sublime point of time of double value. The definitive becomes transmissible. The event requires a witness. The addressee is the witness, and speech is the element in which transmissibility can be transmitted. The witness hears, receives, entrusts to language; he takes up speech “on the lips of the dying,” in order to

promise to “realize” it. He will fail to “realize” it and will transmit in his turn to the survivor the transmutation of his failure.⁵⁵

There is a certain pessimism in this transmission of the failure, that our words are only ever the words of the dead: *sum quod eris, fui quod sis*; I am what you will be, I have been what you are. In the midst of the whispering echoes of death, however, there are also echoes of promise.

This promise finds space within the failure that arrives in the presentation of forgetting, in the “transmutation” that takes place from the delivery from one survivor to the next, the “survivors” of the failure of presenting the occurrence itself. Charles E. Scott, discussing the interplay between memory and forgetting, offers a productive footing:

If I am right in finding in the fusions of horizons a mnemosyncic moment that irritates us as it makes questionable our methodologically based certainties and truths, we arrive at a moment of strange rejuvenation, a fragility that is in its own way a strength. This moment of fusion can give rise to a sense that everything can be lost in a lethic instant, an instant that gives return in loss, not in presence, an instant that turns us by Lethe to Mnemosyne and to the arising—the igniting—of her Muses now in figures

⁵⁵ Deguy, 10.

now in figurations of contemporary thinking, interpreting, and
 imagining.⁵⁶

In terms of Lyotard's notion of presentation, the moment of presenting the forgetting, as opposed to the forgotten, allows us to struggle *for* oblivion rather than struggle *against* it in situating the presentation of the occurrence, and in so doing allows a continued and varied production of thought, or new 'figurations' of the muses, to use Scott's phrasing. This spurring of new thought through the working of Lethe can be paralleled by Lyotard's thinking of parataxis. It is the conjunction *and* that allows the continual (and necessary) passage from one phrase to the next, but it does more than that. The paratactic component of the passage between phrases is also what allows "the vigil for an occurrence, the anxiety and the joy of an unknown idiom."⁵⁷ Paratax, as opposed to syntax, allows the possibility of phrasing without subordination or determination of what precedes and what follows, and it intimates that not everything has been phrased, that new phrases are always possible. And it is in this possibility, in conjunction with the productive force of forgetting in memory, that allows for a certain solace in the expectant (hopeful without hope) wait of a presentation that needs no succeeding phrase, no situation.

⁵⁶ Charles E. Scott, *The Time of Memory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 44.

⁵⁷ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 80.

Chapter 2

I

In the sublime thought of Longinus, with its striving to bring the *hic et nunc*, or here and now, of presentation as such before us through a phantasmal summoning of the image, the element of *pathos* is relegated to a minor position. This changes with the arrival of Kantian aesthetics and its appropriation and innovation of the sublime. Pleasure and displeasure, disinterested sensations that must be held apart from those that arrive in the mere satisfaction of the senses and the moral satisfaction of the good, are central components in Kant's third *Critique*, and yet they occupy something of a mysterious and obscure place within the Kantian system of thought. These two affects are at the heart of what Kant baptizes aesthetic judgment. As an instance in which "nothing at all in the object is designated,"⁵⁸ aesthetic judgment has a properly subjective character and therefore finds itself fundamentally divorced from the processes of its sibling, that is, cognitive or determinate judgments. While the latter type of judgment involves placing a given intuition under a corresponding concept, adding to the edifice of knowledge, the former judgment engages with a singular intuition where a concept is either lacking or indeterminate. Because objective knowledge is not possible without a determined concept, an aesthetic judgment does not tell us anything about the world properly speaking.

⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §1, 5:204.

However, aesthetic judgment does tell us about ourselves in the very act of that judgment. As Kant tells us, aesthetic judgments are the means “in which the subject feels itself as it is affected by [a] representation.”⁵⁹ What arrives in an aesthetic judgment is not knowledge of the object but rather knowledge of the subject. More accurately, what is accrued in aesthetic judgment is different from knowledge altogether. Because of its emphasis on the insularity of pleasure and displeasure, Kantian aesthetics could be described as an informal—that is, intimate—information that informs thought of itself. In his study on Kant’s aesthetics, Jean-François Lyotard affirms this position, writing, “in the analytic of taste, sensation no longer has any cognitive finality; it no longer gives any information about an object but only about the ‘subject’ itself.”⁶⁰ Rather than an aesthetic judgment being *about* an object, it merely arises on the *occasion* of an object. In this distance between the objective phenomenon and the subjective instance of judgment, Lyotard locates one part of what he deems the “tautegorical” aspect of aesthetic judgment: “any act of thinking is thus accompanied by a feeling that signals to thought its ‘state.’ But this state is nothing other than the feeling that signals it . . . a dazzling immediacy and a perfect coincidence of what feels and what is felt.”⁶¹ Thought drags its fingers along the contours of its own walls, smiling at the smoothness and wincing at the roughness.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford University Press, 1991), 9.

⁶¹ Lyotard, *Lessons*, 11.

Yet, what exactly is intimated on this occasion of thought *feeling* itself thinking in aesthetic judgment? The answer, upon a first examination, is the presence of a unified subject: the *I think* is reinforced through a simultaneous *I feel*. With the writing of the third *Critique*, the unity of the Kantian subject becomes established, as the faculty of judgment, according to Kant, provides the necessary bridge that spans the abyss between reason's theoretical and practical endeavors. This unity finds grounding in the particular relation of the faculties of the mind found in the moment of reflective judgment. Writing on the supposed universal communicability of aesthetic judgments, Kant notes: the "determining ground of the judgment . . . can be nothing other than the state of mind that is encountered in the relation of the powers of representation to each other insofar as they relate a given representation to *cognition in general*."⁶² Here, in reflective judgment, the relation between the faculties—a relation that characterizes "cognition in general"—is a non-specific or indeterminate relation that stands in stark contrast to the typical arrangement, in which one particular faculty holds a legislative position and determines its bearing between itself and the other faculties of the mind. What occurs in the moment of aesthetic judgment is that the faculties undergo a certain liberation, entering a state of what Kant famously calls a "free play" of the faculties.⁶³ The mind becomes full of stars rather than constellations.

Engendering a feeling of pleasure for the thinking mind, the free arrangement of the faculties in the judgment of the beautiful is a rare state. Nevertheless, the possibility

⁶² Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, §9, 5:217.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

of this state is always present and is presupposed by the ordinary legislating relations between the faculties. According to Deleuze's reading of Kant, if the faculties can enter into determinate relations with one another, "it must follow that all together they are capable of relationships which are free and *unregulated*, where each goes to its own limit and nevertheless shows the possibility of some sort of harmony with the others."⁶⁴

Despite the fact that the faculties of the mind "differ in nature," they are able to come together in a harmony that preserves their heterogeneity, and this adhesive character of the faculties is what "makes possible their exercise under the chairmanship of one of them according to the a law of the interests of reason."⁶⁵ In this reading of Kant's aesthetics, the pleasure that comes in the free-play of the faculties in the judgment of the beautiful is thought feeling the unifying and accordant relations of its own faculties. The pleasure of the beautiful promises the bridge that crosses the abyss.

But this promise, for Lyotard, remains merely that: a promise. Echoing Deleuze's explication, Lyotard writes: "This finality [of the judgment of beauty] is subjective in that it puts the components of the thinking of the beautiful, that is, of imagination and understanding, together in such a way as to suggest their accord. Thus it is, I repeat, that *one* 'subject,' a subject, that is, *one* is promised."⁶⁶ The unified thinking subject remains merely a promise, however, because this promise is ultimately broken. And its breaking finds its genesis in an aesthetic judgment that both complements and disturbs the

⁶⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xi.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 69.

⁶⁶ Lyotard, *Lessons*, 24.

judgment of beauty: namely, the judgment of the sublime. Lyotard elaborates on the singular feeling of the sublime:

The procedure [of the sublime] reveals the degree to which the unity of the faculties is precarious, lost almost—this is the component of anguish in this feeling . . . Taste [the beautiful] promises everyone the happiness of an accomplished subjective unity; the sublime speaks to a few of another unity, much less complete, ruined in a sense, and more “noble.”⁶⁷

While Lyotard’s commentary on the judgment of the sublime continues to speak of a “unity,” it paradoxically links that unity to an incomplete and broken state. What we find in Kant’s aesthetics, then, is a certain duplicity: the state of “free play” and the accompanying pleasure engendered by judgments of the beautiful are set in relief by the sensation produced by the judgment of the sublime. But the sensation found at the heart of the sublime is not simply the opposite to that of the beautiful. It is not displeasure. Rather, the sublime consists of what Kant calls a “negative pleasure,”⁶⁸ perhaps more accurately described as an oscillation between pleasure and displeasure, a simultaneity of the two, or, paradoxically, a pleasure *through* displeasure. Yet, if we recall that thought is informed of its own state through sensation, a question arises: what is thought being informed of regarding its state in the judgment of the sublime?

⁶⁷ Ibid, 25.

⁶⁸ Kant, 5:254.

The answer to this question is: the state of a *differend*. In the confrontation between the faculties of the imagination and reason that occurs in the instance of the sublime, according to Lyotard's reading of Kant, a *differend* arises in reason's call for the presentation of that which cannot possibly be presented: the Idea of reason. As outlined in the first *Critique*, Kant writes that reason strives "to seek somewhere for a resting place in the regress from the conditioned, which is given, to the unconditioned, which in itself and as regards its mere concept is not indeed actually given, but which alone can complete series of conditions carried out to their grounds."⁶⁹ In order to stave off the infinite task of following causality or counting phenomena, reason produces such Ideas as a "first cause" or "totality," which cannot be verified empirically through our experience in the world. As tokens of this striving for unity and completion, the imagination cannot ignore the Ideas of reason and must present its own absolute, its maximum of presentation, in order to measure up to these Ideas. Yet, these two absolutes are irreducibly heterogeneous: they are incomparable.⁷⁰

To understand this *differend* between the imagination and reason, we must return to the object that occasioned the judgment of the sublime, to time, and ultimately to the event of presentation as such. In the sublime thought of Kant, the judgment of the sublime arises when we encounter a "formless object," such as the rising Alps or a raging sea, and the mind is confounded its inability to comprehend it in its entirety.⁷¹ In the face

⁶⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A584.

⁷⁰ Lyotard, *Lessons*, 123.

⁷¹ Kant, 5:245 ; 5:251.

of this strange appearance, the imagination cannot circumscribe the intuition with its schematizing operations, and the *here* and *now* of presentation as such threatens the mind with its immediacy. Yet, it is this immediacy that calls forth the faculty of reason. As that which is not given in reality through empirical phenomena, the Ideas of reason are fundamentally futurally oriented. They are *expected* despite their impossibility. Turning to the unity and consistency of knowledge provided by reason's Ideas, it is "only a *projected* unity, which one must regard not as given in itself, but only as a problem."⁷² Likewise, the intrusion of the Idea onto the scene of aesthetic judgment procures only a sense of our "vocation" or *Bestimmung* to exercise our reason to in its fullest capacity, a call to us from a time beyond where we presently are. In the intimation of the event of presentation as such, the *Darstellung* of the imagination is ruined, but the irreducible and absolutely heterogeneous *hic et nunc* of the event appears as a fullness of time that can stand in for the futural Ideas of reason so that reason can be satisfied *here* and *now*. This is truly a passage of time, not the passage as flow but the passage as analogy. The future comes *as if* it were in the present.

II

The *as if* of analogy, transmuting the fleeting and ephemeral *hic et nunc* of presentation as such into the futural ever-to-be-actualized Ideas of reason, allows us to see that the Kantian judgment of the sublime as a moment when reason can find reprieve from itself but only by perpetuating the *differend* at the heart of presentation. Yet, the instance of analogy is not alien to Kant's system of thought nor is it merely idiosyncratic

⁷² Ibid,

to the third *Critique*. While Kant keeps a critical eye on the tendency to slip into transcendental illusion and attempts to maintain the separation of the sensible world of phenomena from the supersensible world of noumena, he also undoes his own critical practice by making jumps between the two using a carefully considered and partially concealed manoeuvre. The *as if* of the Kantian *analogia*, with its grounding in an avowed proper proportionality,⁷³ maintains the very demarcations that are being crossed; it keeps everything in its proper place through an improper crossing of the border. Indeed, certain problems arise in this analogical crossing, such as a potential need of a primordial “as if” of a discernible distinction between the transcendental and empirical that allows Kant’s own use of analogy⁷⁴ or a Hegelian return of Nature to itself analogically through artistic Genius.⁷⁵ The analogy entailed in the sublime is merely one of many possible “passages” from one domain of a faculty to another. What will become clear is that the Kantian system of thought is as much about movement and crossing as it is about domiciling and demarcating.

The tension that lies in the crossing of heterogeneous domains is what prompts Lyotard to introduce his own analogy while unfolding his reading of Kant: the Archipelago of the Faculties. In his idiosyncratic reading of Kant, Lyotard renders the faculties of the mind into different “phrase families,” in which each faculty becomes a set of rules for phrasing heterogeneous sets of objects or *Vorstellungen*. For example, the

⁷³ The Greek origin of the word analogy is *análogos*, meaning “proportionate.”

⁷⁴ Richard Beardsworth, “Lyotard’s Agitated Judgment,” in *Judging Lyotard*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (New York: Routledge, 1992), 63.

⁷⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Economimesis,” trans. R. Klein, *Diacritics* 11, no. 2 (Summer, 1981): 13.

imagination would preside over ostensive phrases (“*this* is . . .”); the understanding would preside over cognitive or descriptive phrases (“every effect has a cause”); and reason would preside over non-verifiable phrases (“There is an unconditioned or first cause”). Some phrase families are compatible with one another, such as those between the imagination and the understanding (Every effect has a cause. Here is an example of such, etc.), while others are incompatible, such as those between the imagination and reason (There is an unconditioned cause. Here it is an example of such). While Lyotard’s transformation of the Kantian faculties into phrase families is novel, what is of interest to us here is how Lyotard conceives of their inter-relations. According to Lyotard,

Each phrase family would be like an island: the faculty of judgment would be, at least in part, like an outfitter or an admiral who launches expeditions from one island to another sent out to present to the one what they have found (invented, in the old sense of the word) in the other, and which might serve to the first one as an “as-if” intuition to validate it.⁷⁶

These “expeditions” of judgment constitute what Lyotard calls “passages” between the different faculties of the mind, the most problematic of these passages being those that shuttle the faculty of reason, with its objectively unverifiable objects, and the other faculties of the mind.

The prototypical example of the problematic intercourse with reason is provided by the passage between the undeducible freedom of moral action and the laws of nature, a

⁷⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *Enthusiasm: A Kantian Critique of History*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2009), 12.

passage spanning the gulf between the sensible and supersensible realms. In Kant's *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he argues that moral action cannot be determined by a dogmatic set of arbitrary edicts but rather must be predicated on the fictive universal value of the categorical imperative. According to Kant's famous formulation, a moral being is held "to do no action on any other maxim than one such that it would be consistent with it to be a universal law, and hence to act only *so that the will could regard itself as at the same giving universal law through its maxim.*"⁷⁷ Because the universality of the maxim of moral action cannot be verified, as it properly belongs to the supersensible substrate, it can only be put forth indirectly for validation: that is, according to analogy. Yet, this analogy is occulted by the phrasing of the maxim in its employment of the "so that"—or *so dass* in the German original—of universality which Lyotard argues should properly understood as an "as if."

Similarly, the passage to and from reason can be in the realm of aesthetics—albeit more explicitly—through Kant's explication of the "symbol." According to the third *Critique*, the symbol is a species of *Darstellung* in which the imagination links onto the concept of the understanding. Unlike normal cognition, however, in which the imagination provides an intuition to be directly subsumed under the concept of the understanding, symbolization only occurs indirectly.⁷⁸ Kant gives us an example to understand this mode of *Darstellung*: "Thus a monarchical state is represented by a body with a soul if it is ruled in accordance with laws internal to the people, but by a mere

⁷⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012), 4:434.

⁷⁸ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 5:352.

machine (like a handmill) if it is ruled by a single will, but in both cases it is represented only symbolically.”⁷⁹ Through symbolization, the beautiful can become a symbol of the good, and a transition from the realm of pleasure and displeasure to the realm of desire can take place because the beautiful can call forth “sensations that contain something analogical to the consciousness of a mental state produced by moral judgments.”⁸⁰ Both infiltrator and ambassador, the analogy of the “as if” is a passage between and through spheres of heterogeneity.

However, Kant is careful to prevent any confusion in the indirect presentation of the symbol. Returning to the example of symbolization provided above, Kant adds: “For between a despotic state and a handmill there is, of course, no similarity, but there is one between the rule for reflecting on both and causality.”⁸¹ The passage occurring in symbolization is not one between objects, in the Kantian sense; it is rather a passage of the “rule.” There is no coincidence of identity between an instance of the beautiful and the morally good, but there is a similarity of reflection that is shared between them. As Kant points out, both the beautiful and the good please immediately, are disinterested, involve an instance of freedom, and finally both are declared universal.⁸² In Lyotard’s reading:

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 5:354.

⁸¹ Ibid, 5:352.

⁸² Ibid, 5:354.

It is therefore, “symbolics,” not through a substitution of objects but through the transferal and rotation of an intra-faculty mechanism: a group of rules . . . is transferred, after being altered, from the pull of the feeling of pleasure and pain to that of the faculty of desiring, without us ever being able to speak of direct presentation.⁸³

Sharing only in the rule of reflection, the instance of the beautiful does not allow us to *see* the good in the phenomenal world. Instead, “taste as it were makes possible the transition from sensible charm to the habitual moral interest without too violent a leap.”⁸⁴ The transition from the beautiful to the good is a passage, a passing of the threshold, *as if* one were returning to a homestead.

How, then, should we characterize the analogical passage between the seemingly empty and vacuous *hic et nunc* of presentation as such offered by the *Darstellung* of imagination and the yearning to be present Ideas of reason in the judgment of the sublime? Does it also belong to the mode of analogy known as the symbol? The answer to this question is decidedly no. As Kant stresses, there is a sort of natural affinity between the good and the beautiful in the common rule of reflection that can be found between them. However, when transferred to the aesthetic judgment of the sublime, this affinity finds itself disrupted. In the judgment of the sublime the imagination is not free in the way that is found in the judgment of the beautiful; there is no “free play” of the faculties here. Instead, the imagination is constrained by reason to present something that

⁸³ Lyotard, *Enthusiasm*, 15.

⁸⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:354.

can measure up to its Ideas. Yet, neither is it merely a simple operation of attempted subsumption. Reason wants its Ideas to be actualized—to appear in the phenomenal world—so that it may come to rest in its unifying project, and so engages in a passage that can bring this desire to completion: the passage of exchange. In this passage, the undecidable here and now of presentation as such comes to be displaced by the Idea of reason, *as if* they could be exchanged. And in this exchange, the imagination accrues an unpayable debt.

III

Exchange, an essential component of what Lyotard in *The Differend* calls the economic genre of discourse, is a twining and untwining of two parties, their simultaneous coming together and dissolution. But not only does exchange require two parties, it also requires two reciprocally formulated actions or—to use Lyotard’s lexicon—two phrases: twin instances of giving *and* receiving. As Lyotard writes in *The Differend*:

Phrase 1: (addressor) *x* cedes to (addressee) *y* referent *a*, this (ostensible) thing. Phrase 2: (addressor) *y* cedes to (addressee) *x* referent *b*, that (ostensible) thing. The economic genre: the cession of that thing ought to annul the cession of this thing. Phrases 1 and 2 are linked together with a view (the stakes or finality of the genre) to “freeing” the two parties, to unbinding them.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 173.

The first phrase introduces a tension of reciprocation that the second phrase comes to loosen, not as an expectation but as a presupposition, and this double phrasing constitutes the minimal unit of action within the economic genre. For instance, when one offers a token in exchange for another token, the offering only happens on the condition that the reciprocal offering will happen simultaneously or immediately after. If the second action does not happen, for whatever reason, then the two parties are locked together either in an unresolved asymmetrical exchange, otherwise known as debt, or they continue the play of giving and receiving until the expected outcome has been achieved.

In a similar, albeit modified way, the faculties of the imagination and reason enter into this binding stricture of the double phrase of exchange, *as if* an exchange were taking place. When the imagination provides a *Darstellung* of that which is either formless or resistless, what is really happening is that it provides a *Darstellung* that intimates the event of *presentation as such*, that there is such a thing as the unrepresentable in the phenomenal world. In this seeming impossibility, there is much more than a simple indeterminacy of concept, such as that found within the instance of the beautiful, and as a result this *Darstellung* is taken up by reason rather than the understanding. Because of its radical heterogeneity, the *hic et nunc* of presentation as such—its moment of happening—is mistaken as a fullness or repleteness, and reason seizes the opportunity to insert its futural Ideas, its phenomena-to-be. It offers up its Idea in the expectation that the imagination can fulfill the exchange seemingly made possible by its intimation of the event of presentation as such. Only through acting *as if* this exchange is possible can this temporal displacement between the future and the present—or now—occur and can reason come to rest from its organizing and unifying compulsion.

In the exchange between these two faculties, however, there is an irremediable disparity between the cession and counter-cession or, stated differently, between the offer and the expected fulfillment that will “unbind” the two faculties: the objects to be exchanged are completely asymmetrical. The instance of *Darstellung* on the part of the imagination, merely an intimation of the event of presentation as such, can only be derived from the realm of the sensible and therefore can never equal the Idea that reason offers in the judgment of the sublime. In other words, it is a problem of evaluation, a problem that Lyotard takes up in terms of labor time and its exchange in *The Differend*: “How do you know that y 's debt to x is acquitted when he cedes b against the a he or she received? When a and b are of the same value?”⁸⁶ As a “problem of idiolects,”⁸⁷ the judgment of the sublime is firmly within the domain of a problematic asymmetrical exchange as an equivalency must be made between the futural Ideas of reason and the incomplete now of presentation as such. But, as Rodolphe Gasché notes in his study on Kantian aesthetics, there is never a complete arresting to the progress of thought. At the very least, thought waits: it bides its time, allows time to stock up.

In the economic genre in which the exchange between the imagination and reason takes place, time holds a privileged place. While time is not of import during the production (so to speak) of the Ideas of reason and the *Darstellung* of the imagination, it is important regarding the delay of their deployment, that is, the moment of their exchange. Lyotard elaborates:

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 174.

Production takes time and this time is subtracted from the exchange. Time accumulates during production, it is stocked up in products, up until these are presented for exchange. The qualifications of a seller of services are measured in terms of the amount of training time. The same goes for determining the price of a commodity. The mere fact that it remains in stock raises the cost.⁸⁸

As the *Darstellung* of the imagination with its merely partial nowness of presentation cannot be rendered satisfactory to the Idea of reason, the Idea of reason remains “in stock” in the mind, forever waiting to be rendered applicable to the sensible realm, accumulating more and more time that awaits to be nullified through the completion of exchange. This failure of exchange is felt as displeasurable to thought. Yet, as Kant stresses, this moment of displeasure in the asymmetrical exchange is only a transitory one: “the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them.”⁸⁹ The exchange does, indeed, happen, but only if the imagination takes on a debt to reason. It is for this reason that the pleasure of the judgment of the sublime provides pleasure only negatively;⁹⁰ it happens only through a failure of the imagination. Furthermore, the passage of exchange is how reason justifies the subreption in the judgment of the sublime—that is, how it comes to regard *itself* and its *Ideas* as sublime rather than the object that the imagination is trying

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:245.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 5:246.

to present. By operating *as if* this impossible exchange were possible, reason produces enough satisfaction and pleasure to stave off its unstoppable predilection for unity.

However, there is another possible encounter between the event of presentation and the Ideas of reason, a method of payment for the imagination to complete the exchange with reason without procuring a debt. One encounters this secondary element of exchange in relation to the sublime in a text that, at first glance, appears to have little to do with aesthetics at all, Kant's *Contest of the Faculties*. Using the term "faculties" in a sense very different from the three *Critiques*, Kant there attempts to explicate the relationship between hierarchically separated domains or institutions of knowledge: what he calls the higher faculties of Theology, Law, and Medicine; and the lower faculty of Philosophy. In the course of this endeavor, Kant comes to the question of whether we can know for certain if the human race is improving; this is "not a history of the past, however, but a history of future times, i.e. a *predictive* history."⁹¹ As Lyotard stresses, because this part of history belongs to a set of events yet to come, there can be no direct *Darstellung* of future events;⁹² they belong to a totality of a series that cannot be presented within the phenomenal world. Yet, Kant is adamant that "in human affairs, there must be some experience or other which, as an event which has actually occurred, might suggest that man has the quality or power of being the *cause* and . . . the *author* of his own improvement."⁹³ Emerging from the happenings of world history, this event can

⁹¹ Immanuel Kant, "Conflict of the Faculties," *Political Writings*, trans. and ed. H.S. Reiss, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991, §1.

⁹² Lyotard, *Enthusiasm*, 26.

⁹³ Kant, "Conflict of the Faculties," § 5.

present us with an instance of historical progress; Kant baptizes this event a *Geschichtszeichen*, a “historical sign.”⁹⁴

This “historical sign,” bringing together the power of presentation on the side of the imagination and the Ideas of reason, strongly resembles the judgment of the sublime as outlined in the third *Critique*. For Kant, the example par excellence of the “historical sign” is the French Revolution, but what connects this event to the sublime is not any historical figure or specific phenomenal event of the Revolution. Rather,

we are here concerned only with the attitude of the onlookers as it reveals itself *in public* while the drama of great political changes is taking place: for they openly express universal yet disinterested sympathy . . . which borders almost on enthusiasm, although the very utterance of this sympathy was fraught with danger. It cannot therefore have been caused by anything other than a moral disposition within the human race.⁹⁵

The judgment of the spectators, as they apprehend the unfolding of the revolution, signals that the passage did indeed take place between the imagination and reason, that a sublime sentiment indeed is taking place.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid, §6.

However, we must take care in how this instance of judgment is characterized by Kant.⁹⁶ Lyotard, latching onto Kant's use of the term "enthusiasm," a sentiment discussed under the category of the sublime in the third *Critique*,⁹⁷ is perhaps too quick in characterizing this judgment as one that engenders the same negative pleasure associated with the sublime discussed above, the negative pleasure of the asymmetrical exchange between reason and the imagination. Moreover, in describing the event of the historical sign, Kant reserves for it a merely undetermined indexical function, a "rough indication" of human progression that cannot truly provide objective evidence for the Idea of reason in the same way that the sublime of the third *Critique* calls forth our vocation to use the full capacities of reason itself. But it must be noted that the instance of judgment regarding the French Revolution is only "almost" an instance of enthusiasm, perhaps indicating a certain haste on the part of Lyotard, and Kant himself introduces an enigmatic and ambiguous aspect of the historical sign that undermines its supposedly indexical function and opens a space for another interpretation.

In explaining the function of the historical sign, Kant gives us an obscure definition of the "historical sign": as a "*signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognostikon*."⁹⁸ With this new dimension, a certain fullness or repleteness suffuses the instance of the historical sign, pushing it past both its indexical function and Kant's denomination of it as a mere "sign." Rather, the historical sign is temporally saturated,

⁹⁶ It must be admitted that Kant himself doesn't use the term sublime when writing about the historical sign, but the characterization of that judgement and the affect that belonging to it perhaps allows this identification.

⁹⁷ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:272.

⁹⁸ Kant, "Conflict of the Faculties," §5.

encompassing past, present, and future in its confirmation of the Idea of reason in the progression of humankind.⁹⁹ Whatever is presented by the imagination in this instance of the *Darstellung*, whatever is exchanged with the Idea of reason, appears to be not a failure of *Darstellung* but something akin to its apotheosis: approaching the presentation of presentation as such, the event of presentation. Supplementing its activity of *Darstellung*, the offering of the imagination in the occurrence of the historical sign is able to complete the transaction between the imagination and reason, discharge the futural time accumulating in the Ideas of reason through the overflow of the *nunc* of presentation as such, and thereby “use up” reasons Ideas, use up their unifying force and let them crumble in their age. If the judgment of the sublime in its negative pleasure and asymmetrical exchange is the “passage of the impasse,” as Lyotard phrases it, then the passage between the imagination and reason in the historical sign is the *secret passage*, *the forbidden passage*.

What is added to the *Darstellung* of the imagination to open this passage and discharge the demand of reason, is nothing other than the faculty of presentation itself: namely, the faculty of the imagination. It presents and presents itself in its falling, its failing, its burning. With this additional offer of the presentation of itself in its moment of *Darstellung*, the faculty of imagination presents something akin to the Aesthetic Idea of the third *Critique*: “that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought. . . . which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible. – One readily sees that it is the counterpart

⁹⁹ Lyotard, *Enthusiasm*, 27.

(pendant) of an idea of reason.”¹⁰⁰ Creating something like an Aesthetic Idea of this kind, the imagination comes to touch upon, in the lightest of caresses, the domain of reason. Yet, the fullness of this event of presentation as such is only secured by the self-presentation of imagination’s own ruined image, the wearing of a death mask before one dies. Therefore a displeasure remains. It resonates beneath the pleasure of a reason satisfied. Yet, the feeling of displeasure in the sublime thought of Kantian aesthetics is what illuminates another exchange and a debt as old as reason itself.

IV

As the imagination attempts to present its self-immolation, the moment of presentation as such, in the demand of reason, to pay reason its due, the true tragedy is unveiled as the exchange is completed and the tension of cession and counter-cession is annulled: the Idea of reason itself is an empty token, it is only the whisper of a promise. Our vocation is pro-voked. It is called before us, but it has not yet arrived. We are not yet at our destination as completely moral and rational beings, a destination which resides not in the present moment but in the future. Yet, at this moment in which reason can only promise the future, it also reveals that it is itself in a debtor’s prison: it owes its imperial demand to a primordial or original debt. Yet, this is a debt that it tries to forget or to cover over, in order to display its infinite surplus to distract from its bankruptcy. This move comes about through a play of optics, an artifice of perspective. It arrives in a certain orientation of thought.

¹⁰⁰ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:314.

The debt of reason is elucidated in a relatively minor text by Kant, titled “What is Orientation in Thinking?,” written to defend his friend Mendelssohn’s assertion that the existence of God can be objective knowledge. In order to guide this endeavor, Kant employs the concept of “orientation.” Guiding one’s self according to the cardinal points of the compass, Kant notes, requires more than mere objective knowledge about one’s empirical situation or milieu: “For this purpose [of orienting one’s self geographically] I must necessarily be able to feel a difference within my own *subject*, namely that between my right and left hands. I call this a *feeling* because these two sides display no perceptible difference as far as external intuition is concerned.”¹⁰¹ To be able to guide one’s self using concepts of objective knowledge, according to Kant, one must first begin with an almost primordial “feeling” within one’s self, one that is subjective. Further, Kant writes: “thus, in spite of all the objective data in the sky, I orientate myself *geographically* purely by means of a *subjective* distinction.”¹⁰² The individual being navigates the relation between a subjective interior and an objective exterior through a subjectively felt—rather than objectively known—grounding. Moreover, Kant takes this notion of spatial orientation and extends it into the domain of thought itself.

In encountering an Idea with no possible sensible intuition or phenomenon, such as absolute totality or the unconditioned, the mind must orient itself properly towards this Idea in order to prevent itself from being completely arrested or incapacitated. In an encounter of this type, Kant writes, “[the mind] will then no longer be in a position, in

¹⁰¹ Immanuel Kant, “What is Orientation in Thinking” in *Kant: Political Writings*, trans. H.B. Nisbet. Ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 238.

¹⁰² Kant, “What is Orientation in Thinking?,” 239.

determining its own faculty of judgment, to subsume its judgments under a specific maxim with the help of objective criteria of knowledge, but only the help of a subjective distinction.”¹⁰³ Again, we encounter this obscure notion of a “subjective distinction.” However, Kant is judicious in how he develops this notion of orientation regarding the Ideas of reason. One does not merely use subjective feeling to support any unknown or unknowable Idea. Kant writes: “if this judgment is made necessary by a real *need* . . . we require a maxim in the light of which this judgment can be passed; for reason sooner or later must be satisfied.”¹⁰⁴ It is the condition of “a felt need”¹⁰⁵ that enables the use of orientation within thought and allows thought to accept an Idea of reason which is without sensible support.

The “real need” that permits thought to orient itself according to its Ideas owes its satisfaction to a feeling, is indebted to a feeling that itself produces.¹⁰⁶ The feeling that thought *feels* in view of its deficiency can only be a certain anguish, a desperate desire for “satisfaction.” In other words, it must be a feeling of displeasure that reflects reason’s weakness in itself, perhaps an unbearable weakness. It is precisely at this moment that the *demand* of reason comes into being: facing a representation of the mind that will cause this anguish to return, something must be done. Kant writes, the “*right of the need* of reason supervenes as a subjective ground for presupposing and accepting something

¹⁰³ Ibid, 240.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 240.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 243.

¹⁰⁶ Kant notes that reason itself doesn’t feel but merely “perceives its own deficiency and produces of need through the cognitive impulse.”

which reason cannot presume to know on objective grounds, and hence for *orienting* ourselves in thought.”¹⁰⁷ Thought transmutes the feeling of a need into a justification for a seemingly unimpeachable right and effectively places reason within a state of exception among the faculties of the mind. It is after this first orientation through a feeling of need that one can establish a “rational belief”¹⁰⁸ in successive orientations, and reason can continue its production of, and interest in, its supersensible Ideas: the mind continues to do its work, its *ergon*.

But what of its *parergon*, its frame, its initial orientation through only a feeling or subjective distinction? It appears that the orientation of thought follows almost exactly the logic of the *parergon* outlined by Jacques Derrida in his essay of the same name in *The Truth in Painting*. As Derrida writes, “a parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work done, the fact, the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside.”¹⁰⁹ The subjective orientation of thought as frame, then, accompanies the imperial demand of reason—and its supersensible Ideas—as that which exists alongside it but is veiled or covered by the majesty of reason itself. Derrida continues: “the *parergon* is a form which has as its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy.”¹¹⁰ Likewise, the primal

¹⁰⁷ Kant, “What is Orientation in Thinking?,” 240-1.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 244.

¹⁰⁹ Jacques Derrida, “Parergon” in *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 54.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 61.

orientation of thought by a subjective feeling is effaced in the exact moment that it allows reason to issue an absolute demand of the absolute based on a subjective feeling of a need. The orientation of thought, then, is not only regulated to the position of a mere frame or lens but is also forgotten to be a lens in the first place.

It is as a memento of sorts that the sublime intervenes. It does so not exactly by providing a new orientation in which the mind can frame itself but by suspending, even if just for a moment, any framing gesture of an orientation through a re-visitation to the moment of reason's debt to feeling. Elaborating on the "negative presentation" of the Kantian sublime, Nancy writes:

[Negative presentation] does not constitute a replication, even a negative replication, of this operation [of presentation]. It does not constitute an infinite figure or image but the movement of a cutting, delineation, and seizure . . . It is the unlimited beginning of the delimitation of a form and, consequently, of the state of a form and of the form of a state.¹¹¹

It is the vibratory movement of the sublime, the oscillation between pain and pleasure, which makes us aware of the sublime in its "unlimited beginning" exactly by bringing us back to the moment of displeasure in reason's inadequacy. Particularly interesting for us here is how the sublime informs the "form of a state": could this be the form of our state, the orienting form of thought? Always starting *from* the first time, always *for* the first time, the sublime brings us to a new beginning but never moves past it, for this beginning

¹¹¹ Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Sublime Offering," *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 36.

is unlimited. When viewed in terms of thought itself, this movement of an ever-renewed beginning constitutes a suspension: a suspension without orientation. In the unlimited raising and demolishing [un enlèvement]¹¹² of the limit, the advent of the sublime and its contradictory admixture of feeling takes the orientation unifying the state of reason and brings it back to the beginning, back to its debt to feeling, *as if* we could start all over again.

¹¹² Ibid, 39.

Chapter 3

I

The sublime of Jean-François Lyotard, shaped by its debt to Kant and its neglect of Longinus, is also critically aware of its own genealogy and the refrains of thought repeated in that very lineage. In working out (or, perhaps, working through) his own approach to the sublime, Lyotard identifies how the “unpresentable” event of the sublime can be subject to different *clinamina* or inclinations of presentation: the modern and the postmodern. The former is bound to a certain melancholy or nostalgia that “allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents” while “the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure.”¹¹³ In its modern guise, the aesthetic of the sublime is duplicitous in that the attempt to present the unpresentable is subverted by determining operations of placement, location, or identification, such as the simulated *hic* of Longinian phantasmal presentation or the artificial *nunc* of Kantian temporally displaced moment of exchange.¹¹⁴ “Programmed by generic rules,” the sublime “loses its character as event and becomes recitation.”¹¹⁵ In this way, the modern aesthetic of the sublime and its nostalgic pleasure via formal recognition effaces the affect of displeasure proper to the

¹¹³ Jean-François Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism?,” *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.

¹¹⁴ As Lyotard notes in his essay “Re-Writing Modernity,” the modern and the postmodern do not so much refer to specific historical moments but rather to certain modes of thinking. This is how Longinus and Kant can be said to engage in this modern *clinamen* of presentation.

¹¹⁵ Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 128.

heterogeneity of the sublime event and could therefore be seen as more akin to the Kantian judgment of the beautiful.

The latter *clinamen* of presenting the sublime, baptized by Lyotard as postmodern, takes a different trajectory, however. Rather than presenting the unrepresentable using the gilded idols of familiar forms and categories,

the postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.¹¹⁶

What makes Lyotard's postmodern sublime radical is precisely its movement to problematize the *radix*, to uproot its forms and put forth the "unrepresentable in presentation itself." In the absence of any recognizable form of the here and now, the *hic et nunc* of Longinus and Kant respectively, there appears to be no stable footing from which to approach the advent of the sublime event, and this estrangement from familiarity is where one experiences the specific admixture of pleasure and displeasure, borrowed from the Kantian sublime, that is so important to Lyotard's own conception. Rather than making displeasure merely a means towards pleasure that ultimately effaces its anterior moment, as in Kant, Lyotard's sublime instead holds the two together

¹¹⁶ Lyotard, "What is Postmodernism?," 81.

simultaneously in a taut simultaneity: displeasure in the realization that something remains to be thought or phrased but cannot yet be; and pleasure in the realization that thought is not finished, that one can discover (and not learn) how to think differently. To merely learn how to think differently would entail a repetition or recitation of the already-thought through established rules and formulae; to discover how to think would signal that one is truly in the province of the unrepresentable.

As the wellspring of displeasure in the aesthetic movement of the sublime, the unrepresentable can be neither a verifiable object of a descriptive phrase (the unrepresentable has the properties of *x* or *y*) nor an immutable referent in an ostensive phrase (*this* is the unrepresentable). As discussed above in relation to the *differend*, what is properly unrepresentable is *presentation as such*, the singular and heterogeneous happening of any given.¹¹⁷ As a result, we run into a certain paradox in Lyotard's injunction to weld the unrepresentable to presentation itself for the unrepresentable and presentation are seemingly co-incidental with one another. It is perhaps in the face of this paradox and lack of procedure to unravel it that Lyotard resorts to a paradox of another sort while intimating the quest of the postmodern artist: "Those rules and categories [of judgment] are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done* . . . the paradox of the future

¹¹⁷ Geoffrey Bennington gives a useful summary of the elusive yet present character of presentation: the indubitable 'that' of the sentence is not *the universe presented*, with its situation of instances [addressor, addressee, referent, and sense] but the *presentation of the universe*. A sentence presents what it presents, but cannot present that it presents what is presents. A further sentence . . . can make of that *event* of presentation the referent of the universe it presents, in an effort to remember the forgotten presentation: in so doing, it 'forgets' its own event of presentation." *Lyotard: Writing the Event*, 126.

(*post*) anterior (*modo*).”¹¹⁸ Producing a tension between the future and the past, the “will have” of the future anterior can simulate the temporal moment of the present, the now. However, this suspension between the future and the past in the present moment would only be illusory, a fact of which Lyotard is all too aware. The now always escapes “the intention to identify, the project of seizing and identifying an ‘entity’ that would, ‘here and now,’ be the thing itself.”¹¹⁹ Instead, we must read Lyotard’s mobilization of the future anterior as preserving a certain fidelity to the indeterminacy of the sublime event. In working in the mode of the future anterior, the “will have been done,” in discovering rules that will only be rules in retrospect, the postmodern artist or thinker comes closest to approximating the feeling of the *hic et nunc* by merely testifying to the unrepresentability of the event, that here is in fact something left to be presented.

Yet, in theorizing the sublime, in writing about it, in testifying to the feeling that something cannot quite be put into words or rendered appropriate for cognitive consumption, Lyotard himself is attempting to link onto the unrepresentable in a manner akin to those artists he engages with. As Gérald Sfez rightly points out, Lyotard engages in a style of writing that “is at once both the effacement of style in the philosophical and a philosophical style,”¹²⁰ employing dialogic, elliptical, and fragmented styles (to name a few) throughout his oeuvre. But Lyotard is not merely an artist but also a philosopher,

¹¹⁸ Lyotard, “What is Postmodernism?,” 81.

¹¹⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, “Rewriting Modernity,” in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 24-5.

¹²⁰ Gérald Sfez, “The Writing of the Differend,” trans. Kent Still, in *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*, eds. Claire Nouvet, Zrinka Stahuljak, and Kent Still (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 102.

and if the sublime event calls for a shedding of consolatory forms or categories, what mode of linking testifies to the differend at the heart of the unrepresentable, the unphrasability of the *hic et nunc*, in the genre of philosophical discourse? The first step in answering this question lies in the distinction Lyotard mobilizes between the *quid* and the *quod*. Writing on the painting of Barnett Newman, Lyotard notes: “if, then, there is any ‘subject-matter’, it is immediacy. It happens here and now. What [quid] happens comes later. The beginning is *that* there is . . . [quod]; the world; *what* there is.”¹²¹ Barnett Newman’s painting, according to Lyotard, provokes a state of thought in which any attempt to determine its significance or meaning, the *what* of the painting, is arrested or inhibited. But this is not to say that the painting is a complete emptiness or vacant of meaning for the viewer; the individual is still *affected* by the occurrence of the painting, feels the *that* there is something left to be said or expressed. Continuing his engagement with the work of Barnett Newman, Lyotard writes: “It is at the very least a sign, the question-mark itself, the way in which *it happens* is withheld and announced: *Is it happening?* The mark of the question is ‘now’, *now* like the feeling that nothing might happen: the nothingness now.”¹²² The question *is it happening?* should not be mistaken for an explication of Newman’s work; rather, it is Lyotard’s closest engagement with the unrepresentable in philosophical discourse. Neither a determinate object nor a determinate tense can be extracted from the phrase due to the presence of a question mark, which subverts any attempt at certainty. When we encounter it either in Lyotard’s writing or this

¹²¹ Jean-François Lyotard, “Newman: the Instant,” in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 82.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 82.

very page, there is always a moment of hesitation: a certain displeasure at its obstinacy; a certain pleasure at realizing that we are not yet finished thinking. Through its testimony *that (quod)* there is some indeterminacy, even in philosophical discourse, Lyotard's question *is it happening?* provokes the missed event of presentation as such similarly to the abstract art of Newman and for this reason appears to me as Lyotard's greatest contribution to the theory of the sublime.

At the risk of tautology, the question of the sublime, then, becomes the question of the sublime: *Is it happening?* The feeling of the sublime, evoked by the perceived unrepresentability of presentation itself, is attested to within thinking, philosophy writ large, in the form of an interrogative. As an indeterminate question, thinking can open itself to the sublime event without prejudging, identifying, or speaking on behalf of what cannot be phrased. Only in this mode of thinking, philosophy's own form of the future anterior—that is, thinking without a prescribed or normative rule—can one attempt to “save the honor of thinking”¹²³ in the face of the *differend* of presentation. But the interrogative, itself, holds a privileged place within the genre of philosophical discourse. As a potential function for determination, the interrogative is often an opening salvo for judgment. Moreover, the interrogative often bears within itself the force of obligation. Lyotard's interrogative may inadvertently continue the effacement of the *differend* in the face of the unrepresentable. Is one obliged to answer the question *is it happening?*

II

¹²³ Lyotard, *The Differend*, xii.

Is it happening? It is a seemingly simple question yet also one that is steeped in obscurity. Is Lyotard's question an open invitation ("try to guess, if you like")? Or does it carry a force of obligation, demanding a participation in a theatrical enactment of a call and answer ("You ought to tell me what is happening")? As an instance of the interrogative that only presents an indeterminate *hic et nunc*, the question *is it happening?* signals that it is precisely the here and now that is missing and the here and now is what must be searched for. Only by eschewing the pretenses to absolute presence can one authentically attempt to present the instance of presentation itself and testify to the *differend* of presentation. And if Lyotard's phrasing of the interrogative does indeed belong to those attempts akin to postmodern artists to present that there is an unrepresentable, namely presentation as such, then it is a question that is inextricably bound to the pursuit of an ethical orientation, laboring under the colossal weight of obligation.

In his writing on the painting of Barnett Newman, Lyotard maintains that Newman's artistic endeavor attempts to instill a sense of obligation through the provocation of the feeling of the sublime. Lyotard writes: "The message is the presentation, but it presents nothing; it is, that is, presence. This pragmatic organization is much closer to an ethics than to any aesthetics or poetics. Newman is concerned with giving colour, line or rhythm *the force of obligation* within a face-to-face relationship, in the second person . . ." ¹²⁴ Drawing on Levinas's ethics in relation to the face of the Other, Lyotard situates the work of Newman within an attempt to express the absolute alterity of

¹²⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, "Newman: the Instant," in *The Inhuman Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 81; italics mine.

presentation itself. But while the “message” of the painting is presentation, this message and why it “presents nothing,” properly speaking, cannot be delivered: the occurrence of presentation can only be known negatively as what is never present. Yet, as the moment of presentation recedes, the feeling of the sublime remains, and from this feeling comes both the intimation of presentation’s alterity and its accompanying ethical call for expression. Similarly, Lyotard’s interrogative, *is it happening?*, engages in this same movement and therefore comes to accrue an ethical valence.

However, it is not only that Lyotard’s philosophical phrase participates in art’s ethical relation to presentation; art also participates in the interrogative movement shared by Lyotard’s philosophical phrase. In light of this, we come to see a certain co-incidence between the activity of thinking and the activity of artistic creation. Regarding the former, Lyotard writes: “the question of how to make others understand what thinking is is the question of the intellectual. The philosopher asks only: ‘What is thinking?’”¹²⁵ In another essay, Lyotard takes up a similar line of thought regarding artists, noting that “painters or writers (or musicians, etc.) have to reply to the question: ‘What is it to write?’, ‘What is it to paint?’”¹²⁶ The tasks of these two endeavours, then, are complementary to each other: one poses the question (the task of the philosopher) while the other gives a response to a question (the task of the artist). It would be a mistake to see these two activities as completely separate endeavors; rather, one should see them as

¹²⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, “Representation, Presentation, Unpresentable,” in *The Inhuman Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 128.

¹²⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, “After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics,” in *The Inhuman Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 135.

two components or stages of the same adventure: to recognize that indeterminacy exists and to present that very indeterminacy. In other words, to present the unrepresentable.

What makes Lyotard's interrogative, *Is it happening?*, particularly remarkable is that it seemingly combines the two endeavours into one phrase belonging to the philosophical genre of discourse. Not only does the question orientate one towards the problem of presentation as such, but it also testifies to that problem by provoking the feeling of the sublime and thereby affectively signaling that there is indeed something unrepresentable.

Things become more complicated when we come to interrogate Lyotard's interrogation and begin to measure the distance between the work of postmodern artists and the work of Lyotard's philosophical discourse. As Lyotard stresses, the fact that one must, out of necessity, react to the *differend* of presentation is a given, but *how* one reacts to the *differend* (or links on to it, to use the lexicon of Lyotard's *The Differend*) is not: "One can strive to determine this something by setting up a system, a theory, a programme or a project – and indeed one has to, all the while anticipating that something. One can also enquire about the remainder, and allow the indeterminate to appear as a question-mark."¹²⁷ What must be remembered is that Lyotard's interrogative is merely an attempt to link onto the sublime feeling provoked by the *differend* of presence as such and the attempt to testify to that *differend* by likewise instilling that feeling of disappointment at defeated thought and jubilation at its never-finished task. Where the tension arises is in the distance between the Lyotard's "enquiry" and the "appearance" of the sublime as a "question-mark." As Lyotard phrases it above, the interrogative *is it*

¹²⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," in *The Inhuman Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). 91.

happening? seems to derive from the event of presentation, itself appearing in the form of a question. But this is somewhat inconsistent: the occurrence of presentation would be enquiring about its own occurrence, as an uncertainty of being as its being. Yet, in another essay, the unrepresentable, dubbed *matter*, “does not question the mind, it has no need of it, it exists, or rather insists, it sists ‘before’ questioning and answer, ‘outside’ them.”¹²⁸ One must, then, strive to maintain the distance between the event of presentation’s *differend* and the interrogative of *is it happening?*, for they are separate things. However, Lyotard seems to conflate the two.

This movement to combine the event of presentation with the enquiry regarding it engenders the illusion that the moment of presentation is indeed before us, that the event of presentation is calling us to answer for its occurrence as a question. Far from being a simple mistake, however, the conflation of the occurrence of presentation and the interrogative that links onto it does more than merely mislead us. As Rodolphe Gasché notes: “Understood as events, phrases ‘do’ things. They have actual effects as well as side effects, and inadvertent effects, and therefore trigger other responses, other events that may clash with the initial phrase events.”¹²⁹ Lyotard’s interrogative, along with its illusion of a presence of presentation as such, provides a temptation in the phrase’s very form as interrogative in that it entails an undeniable answerability: it welcomes answers, encompasses them, validates them. The pretension of securing the *hic et nunc* of

¹²⁸ Lyotard, “After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics,” 142.

¹²⁹ Rodolphe Gasché, “Saving the Honor of Thinking,” in *Minima Memoria: In the Wake of Jean-François Lyotard*, eds. Claire Nouvet, Zrinka Stahuljak, and Kent Still (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 28.

presentation as such, entangled in both the sublime of Longinus and the sublime of Kant, is seemingly evaded in Lyotard's idiosyncratic formulation, but the *hic et nunc*, now encountered as question, can then undergo something akin to an intellectual waterboarding. As a potential testimony to the *differend* of presentation within philosophical discourse and driven by the obligation invoked by its proximity to the alterity of presentation as such, the interrogative *Is it happening?* can easily give way to the terror of *interrogation*.

III

The interrogation that unfolds from the interrogative *is it happening?* is not a complete perversion or deviation from the event of the sublime. After all, interrogation has a strong connection to terror: from at least the Inquisition to the crossing of borders in our contemporary moment, the posing of the question has had an unsettling relationship with the disturbing affects of anxiety and fear. And terror, in turn, has an intimate relation to the event of the sublime, the very event that prompts the linkage of Lyotard's *is it happening?* Edmund Burke, a near contemporary of Kant, provides us with this mobilization of terror regarding the aesthetic event of sublime. In a famous and oft-quoted passage, Burke writes: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*."¹³⁰ As that which threatens us with annihilation, the terrible is what secures the feeling as properly

¹³⁰ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 36.

sublime. Yet it must be remarked that Burke's sublime, like that of Kant and Lyotard, is characterized by the admixture of both pleasure and displeasure, and for this reason that which instills terror must be held at "certain distances" and with "certain modifications"¹³¹ so that a pleasure can issue from the encounter with the event. We will soon see that these "distances" and "modifications" enable the slipping from the interrogative as testimony to the interrogation of the moment of the event itself.

Despite his (somewhat ambivalent) discipleship to Kant concerning the sublime, Lyotard does allow himself moments of theoretical infidelity, and in some instances he turns to Burke while developing his own theory of the sublime. In particular, Lyotard notes that "[Kant] strips Burke's aesthetic of what I consider to be its major stake – to show that the event of the sublime is kindled by the threat of nothing further happening."¹³² This aspect of the event of the sublime, entailing the "threat of nothing further happening," is what Burke identifies as the source of the displeasure in the sublime, the feeling that he baptizes as "terror." Lyotard subsequently frames this feeling in terms of privation: "Terrors are linked to privation: privation of light, terror of darkness; privation of others, terror of solitude; privation of language, terror of silence; privation of objects, terror of emptiness; privation of life, terror of death. What is terrifying is that the *It happens that* does not happen, that it stops happening."¹³³ This feeling of displeasure in Lyotard's sublime, the feeling of terror, seems at odds with the

¹³¹ Ibid, 36-7.

¹³² Lyotard, "The Sublime and the Avant-Garde," *The Inhuman*, 99.

¹³³ Ibid.

feeling of displeasure that characterizes the situation of the *differend* in the event of presentation, namely the displeasure of encountering that which demands to be phrased but cannot yet be. The strangeness of the sublime event in its terribleness, because of its radical unfamiliarity, makes the *it is happening* of presentation appear as a suspension of happening, a privation of being through an intimation of not-being, an intimation of the end. While the displeasure of the *differend* signals a state of indeterminacy and heterogeneity, the displeasure of terror signals rather the state of absolute cessation: the nullification of both homogeneity and heterogeneity, determinacy and indeterminacy.

Yet, the two are in fact co-incident; they are merely two sides of the same moment. The radical heterogeneity of the event intimated in the feeling of displeasure in the sublime only *appears*, for a moment, as the end. Unexpectedly meeting that which it is unprepared for, albeit negatively, thought is arrested, and despite the limited duration of this moment, an intimation of thought's end is comprehended. But, as Lyotard notes in *The Differend*, there is no cessation to thought and phrasing in general, and so thought continues as it necessarily must, for even silence is an instance of phrasing. This tension between contingency (being able not to be) and necessity (not being able not to be) allows the moment of transition from pure terror to a terror that is tempered into a sense of obligation to find new idioms to phrase that which cannot yet be phrased, the moment of presentation itself. Lyotard, himself, is aware of how terror functions in this regard:

Burke wrote that for this terror to mingle with pleasure and with it to produce the feeling of the sublime, it is also necessary that the terror-causing threat be suspended, kept at bay, held back. This suspense, this lessening of a threat or a danger, provokes a kind of pleasure that is

certainly not that of a positive satisfaction, but is, rather, that of relief. This is still a privation, but it is a privation at one remove; the soul is deprived of the threat of being deprived of light, language, life.¹³⁴

The secondary privation that Lyotard speaks of, the privation of privation, comes in how one links onto the event of presentation intimated in the feeling of displeasure within the aesthetic of the sublime, how one testifies to this heterogeneous event with their own attempt (if at all), and how the terror is held at a “certain distance” and with “certain modifications,” to return to Burke’s formulation.

If Lyotard’s phrasing of *Is it happening?* within the philosophical genre of discourse serves both as a testament to the heterogeneity of the event and an instigation to search for new idioms to phrase this event, then it only gives us a precarious example. The interrogative calls forth a response, and any response is a response to the undetermined *something* of the phrase. Yet, a response does not necessarily entail a determination and is able to retain the heterogeneous character of the event of presentation. Nevertheless, there is an impulse in the interrogative to introduce its own idiomatic “distances” and “modifications” to the moment of terror that comes in the encounter with the event of presentation. Drawing on the work of Emile Benveniste, Catherine Belsey presents the notion of an “interrogative text,” one which both questions any sense of a unified subject position and refuses to accept any single perspective.¹³⁵ But the interrogative text also “invite[s] the reader to produce answers to the questions it

¹³⁴ Ibid, 99

¹³⁵ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1980), 91-92.

implicitly or explicitly raises” and “invites an answer or answers to the question it poses.”¹³⁶ If Lyotard’s interrogative phrase, *Is it happening?*, can be considered along these same lines, then his testament to the *differend* of presentation itself invites a continued renewal of the very wrong that the sublime feeling signals through its invitation of determination.

Likewise Lyotard’s interrogative could produce a cascading of interrogatives in its wake (What is happening? What does it mean? Why does it matter?). At first glance, this may not seem like an entirely detrimental activity: The ever-unfolding of questions seemingly skirts determination and the circumscription of heterogeneity. Mirroring the “infinity of plastic essays to be made”¹³⁷ by art and its goal to present presentation as such, to testify to its impossible presence, Lyotard’s interrogative could be an instance of philosophy’s *infinity of interrogative essays to be made* in its attempt to do the same within its domain. But, despite this possibility within the interrogative form, Lyotard remains ambivalent regarding the posing of the question in general. Lyotard writes: “It is the destiny or destination of the mind to question (as I have just done). And to question is to establish the relation of something with something.”¹³⁸ The interrogative *Is it happening?*, then, in addition to acting as a possible testament to the unrepresentable event of presentation as such, the *it is happening*, can also be part of an operation which disavows the unrepresentable through its very interrogation.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Lyotard, “Representation, Presentation, Unrepresentable,” *The Inhuman*, 126.

¹³⁸ Lyotard, “After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics,” *The Inhuman*, 142.

Yet, the phrase regime of the interrogative is not amenable to interrogation in and of itself. Rather Lyotard's phrase owes it imperial force to the genre of discourse in which it belongs, one which strives towards the validation of cognition: the philosophical genre. Returning to *The Differend* and its discussion of obligation, Lyotard notes: "Obligation would take place only at the level of genres, which prescribe stakes: you ought to link on like this in order to get that. For example, if your discourse ought to be philosophical, then you ought to link on with a view to finding the rule for the discourse (and then, you ought to pay attention to the *Is it happening?*)."¹³⁹ The obligation carried by the interrogative, then, becomes an interrogation when the genre of philosophical discourse impels the linking of further questions or further answers in order to find the rules for the judgment concerning the *is it happening?* Writing on Lyotard, Rodolphe Gasché notes: "The discursive genre of cognition, which is largely responsible for shaping philosophical thought, is intrinsically skeptical of the 'Does it happen?'—the *Arrive-t-il?*"—and thus is bound to produce differends."¹⁴⁰ The very phrasing of the interrogative *Is it happening?* occurs in the genre of discourse that seemingly cannot fully accept it, and the *hic et nunc* of presentation as such remains within the realm of the *differend* even as it is testified to within the philosophical genre: "Attested, suffering, and the untamable are as if already destroyed. I mean that in witnessing, one also exterminates. The witness is a traitor."¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 116.

¹⁴⁰ Gasché, "Saving the Honor of Thinking," 42.

¹⁴¹ Lyotard, "Domus and the Megalopolis," *Inhuman*, 203.

IV

Despite the weight of the telos of the philosophical genre of discourse, with its continuous endeavour to find the rule that will govern its meandering voyage, the tendency for Lyotard's interrogative *Is it happening?* to transform into the terror of interrogation is not ensured. It is not a necessity that the interrogative bears an unimpeachable obligation that one "ought to answer" or that one "ought to clarify" the question in other terms. What must be stressed, at least one more time, is only that one must link or phrase, not that one must link in a particular way. In the face of a *telos* belonging to any genre of discourse, a deviation or a swerve is always possible. But if this is the case, how else can one link onto Lyotard's interrogative testament to the unpresentable character of presentation as such without determining the *hic et nunc* of presentation, and therefore wronging its proper heterogeneity, through the process of questioning and answering? A possible breach in the determining aspect of the interrogative can perhaps be found through a linking, or phrasing, that may at first seem very distant from the genre of philosophical discourse and its quest for questioning: the fable. While Lyotard himself never makes a concrete connection between the interrogative *Is it happening?* and what could be called the genre of fabulative discourse, the manner of linking that this discourse allows to Lyotard's testament to the event of presentation gives us an alternative to the determining aspect of interrogation, enacting a movement from *interrogation* to *interregnum*.

Yet, in order to stave off the force of interrogation in the interrogative and more adequately testify to the here and now of the event of presentation, the genre of the fable must be one that is hospitable, a good host to the fleeting guest of the event, of

presentation as such. For this reason, fable must be held at a distance from another notion mobilized by Lyotard throughout his oeuvre: namely, narrative. Used extensively in *The Postmodern Condition*, narrative functions as a method of legitimating forms of knowledge and practice through enabling a certain reiterability and repetition that reinforce what could be considered a “good competence.”¹⁴² Narrative makes a return in *The Differend* as a genre of discourse itself, one that is problematic in relation to states of the *differend*. As Lyotard notes, “Narrative is perhaps the genre of discourse within which the heterogeneity of phrase regimens, and even the heterogeneity of genres of discourse, have the easiest time passing unnoticed.”¹⁴³ While this aspect of narrative may appear congruous with the heterogeneity of presentation as such, allowing the event of presentation to come to the fore, it is rather the opposite. “Narratives drive the event back to the border”¹⁴⁴ and subvert the moment of tension of the *differend* and its admixture of pain and pleasure by making them merely moments of a progressing story rather than moments to be lingered over. Neither, however, should the fable be confused with a mere example of myth. Akin to narrative in that it carries an “identificatory force,” myth differs from narrative by approaching the *differend* directly, “appropriating what is absolutely improper,”¹⁴⁵ and rendering the *differend* into a type of sigil. Myth occults the *differend* by hiding it in plain sight.

¹⁴² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on the State of Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 18-19.

¹⁴³ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 151.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 152.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

Emerging from an act of reflective thinking, the linking between the interrogative and the fable, in contradistinction to narrative and myth, offers us an example of the only kind of thinking that according to Lyotard, can attempt to do justice to the *differend*. If we recall Lyotard's statements above, we see that reflective thinking is being attuned to the temporality of the future anterior, the *what will have been*, and as a result the fable is not a moment of re-telling or re-counting a previously given set of coordinates or paradigmatic rules. Just as Dylan Sawyer, in his study on the relation between literature and the *differend*, reserves a distance between literature and narrative in general, with its tendency to "re-inscribe" and "re-tell,"¹⁴⁶ through the literature's capability to introduce a certain innovation or newness into its relation to the *differend*, one must hold a similar distance between fable and narrative. While Sawyer's conception of literature perhaps undermines itself through an over-reliance on remembrance and recalling the moment of the *differend* itself, fable as it should be understood here reaches towards no anterior moment: it has no memory, properly speaking. In their writing on art, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explicitly distinguish between acts of memory and acts of fabulation:

Memory plays a small part in art (even and especially in Proust). It is true that every work of art is a *monument*, but here the monument is not something commemorating a past, it is a bloc of present sensations that owe their preservation only to themselves and that provide the event with the compound that celebrates it. The monument's action is not memory

¹⁴⁶ Dylan Sawyer, *Lyotard, Literature, and the Trauma of the Differend* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 21.

but fabulation. We write not with childhood memories but through blocs of childhood that are the becoming-child of the present.¹⁴⁷

Fabulation, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is part of a process that separates the actual perceptions and affections involved in a given work, both on the part of the artist and art viewer, from its authentic being. “The work of art is a being of sensation and nothing else: it exists in itself.”¹⁴⁸ In an act of fabulation, memory must be eschewed so that sensation can become a “monument,” properly speaking.

While Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of fabulation differs from Lyotard’s notion of the fable in that Lyotard maintains an interest in those who encounter states of the *differend* and its admixture of affective states, both strains of thinking reject the role of memory in both fabulation’s construction and its apprehension. It is this fact that imbues Lyotard’s notion of the fable with a certain autonomy akin to the in itself and of itself of the artwork in Deleuze and Guattari’s philosophy of art, despite the aforementioned emphasis on the aesthetic spectator. The autonomous character of Lyotardian fable is a result of its belonging to what he deems the mode of “realism.” Unlike conventional understandings of the term “realism,” Lyotard takes an idiosyncratic approach, noting: “Realism is the art of making reality, of knowing reality, and knowing how to make reality.”¹⁴⁹ Realism, then, is not to be understood as mere representation or mirrored

¹⁴⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 167-8.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 164.

¹⁴⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, “A Postmodern Fable,” in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 91.

reflection but as something akin to *poesis* or a making. More precisely, the fable is a radically indeterminate form of *poesis*. Lyotard continues: “In the fable, linguistic energy is expended for imagining. It therefore does fabricate a reality, that of the story it tells, but this reality is left in suspense with regard to its cognitive and technical use. It is exploited reflexively, that is, referred back to language in order to link onto its topic.”¹⁵⁰ Neither an answer to the question of *is it happening?* nor a mode of the *Bildungsroman*, the fable engages in a reflexive activity that is counter to any “cognitive and technical use” The fable as interregnum only links onto the interrogative obliquely, tentatively, only with phantom lines. “A fable is exposed neither to argumentation nor to falsification. It is not even a critical discourse, but merely imaginary. This is how it exploits the space of determination the system keeps open for hypothetical thought.”¹⁵¹

Yet, if the fable is reflexive it is because it is also *reflective* in the Kantian sense; more than merely a moralistic tale, the fable takes on a unique valence among the various, infinite genres of discourse through the affect that it engenders. “With no cognitive or ethico-political pretension, the fable grants itself a poetic or aesthetic status. It has worth only by its faithfulness to the postmodern affection, melancholia. It recounts its motive, first of all. By the same token, every fable is melancholic, since it supplements reality.”¹⁵² As the start to the fable concerning presentation as such, Lyotard’s interrogative *Is it happening?* adds another (there will always be at least one more)

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 95.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 100.

¹⁵² Ibid, 101.

attempt to testify that there is, indeed, an unrepresentable. Yet, as Lyotard makes us aware, this can only be done by adding on to reality as it is presented and thus only ever missing the moment of total integration and presentation. Moreover, Lyotard expresses what to him resolves in the resonating affective chord of the event: from the discordant displeasure of knowing that something escapes thought, to the pleasurable recognition that there is something left to say, we slowly come to the realization that it will never be enough, that we will never be enough. Is this the moment to resign or to save the honor of thinking?

Conclusion

Melencolia I—Rather than a feeling idiosyncratic to the fable, perhaps the feeling of melancholy suffuses all three sites of sublime thought regarding the event of presentation as such. Each moment of thought discussed above constitutes a jubilant failure regarding the event of presentation. In the rhetorical treatise of Longinus, the phantasmal image of thought that returns the event of presentation before our eyes is tempered by an echoing refrain intimating the impossibility of this return. In the transcendental aesthetic of Kant, the futural Idea of reason exchanged with the irreducible event of the here and now, as if they were comparable, is undermined by a return to the past debt of reason and its subsequent re-orientation. Lastly, the interrogative *Is it happening?*—with its problematic relations to interrogation, terror, and obligation—disrupts itself by becoming the beginning of a para-epistemic instant of phrasing: the fable. In our inability to untangle the aporetic knot of the *hic et nunc* once and for all, what remains in these moments of sublime thought is a resignation that one can merely testify that there is something that escapes thought. Like Albrecht Dürer's brooding angel, with its tools, instruments, and methods seemingly rendered useless and its visage turned away from the light of hope, our thought is arrested, and nothing can give us consolation, let alone deliver us from the labyrinthine puzzle of presentation.

Knight, Death and the Devil—Yet, as has been stressed throughout this thesis, there is no cessation of phrasing and therefore no cessation of thought. Must we then forge ahead, leaving behind sublime thought and its aporetic presentation of presentation as such? Jean-Luc Nancy, in the preface to a collection of essays on the subject of the sublime, writes:

The sublime properly constitutes our *tradition* . . . What it passes on to us in the name of the sublime is not *an* aesthetics. It is above all not an aesthetics of the grandiose, the monumental, or the ecstatic, with which the sublime is often confused—admittedly not without certain historical reasons, which must be handled with discretion, even as this all-too-heavy word *sublime* must perhaps gradually be effaced.¹⁵³

While Nancy is reminding us of the overburdened state of the word *sublime* itself, there is also the sense that he is intimating that the sublime and its modality of presentation will be overcome or surmounted; it will be “effaced.” For Nancy, the question of the sublime is above all the question of “sensible presentation,” one which will “put into communication or contact all instances of presentation (for example, history, community, sense, politics, thought, and even representation, which is itself also one of these instances).”¹⁵⁴ The presentation that accompanies the sublime, as elaborated by Nancy, is seemingly a mere means towards an end, one that opens the way to a general investigation of presentation. Like Dürer’s Knight—flanked by the Devil and Death—who nevertheless marches forward armored, mounted, and with a steadfast gaze, we move onto other moments of thought with the enigma of presentation as such in tow.

Saint Jerome in His Study—But it is not enough to carry a burden yet pay it no mind, to merely endure unthinkingly a task that is set before us. This is not the path of responsible thought. Returning to the opening of this thesis, I remind us that thinking the *differend*, that which escapes thought itself, constitutes the properly ethical dimension of

¹⁵³ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Preface to the French Edition,” *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question*, 1.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

philosophy, and for this reason, the thought of the sublime remains integral to this project. Designating not only the event of presentation as such, sublime thought names the site where thought both responsibly faces that which confounds it at every turn and ensures that we never forget that this unthought *happens*. The sublime, the attempt to think presentation as such, is not a cross to bear but a pendant around our neck. In the third Critique, Kant calls the Aesthetic Idea the “counterpart” [das Pendant] to the Idea of reason,¹⁵⁵ and in a similar way, the ruined thought of presentation as such is the counterpart to our occulting and forgetful mode of everyday thinking. “Being prepared to receive what thought is not prepared to think is what deserves the name of thinking.”¹⁵⁶ Like Dürer’s saint, engrossed in his studies, whose glance towards the cross on the table would necessarily also take in the skull on the nearby windowsill, we must keep our mysteries, our enigmas, our pendant thoughts close at hand so that they can, if not guide us, at least remind us that there is something that as of yet remains unthought.

¹⁵⁵ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:314.

¹⁵⁶ Lyotard, “Time Today,” *The Inhuman*, 73.

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