

Resisting a Discourse of Mastery: A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard

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Jean-François Lyotard is preoccupied with both “culture” and “writing,” and he connects the two with his notion of “femininity.” While he conceives of himself not as a writer but as a philosopher (because he must necessarily always be conscious of “meaning” when he writes), he nonetheless sees writing (in the expanded contemporary sense of the term) as central to postmodern “openness” and resistance to certainty. For Lyotard, true writing is the attempt to “resist the network of exchanges in which cultural objects are commodities,” to resist “the simple and naive exchangeability of things in our world.” His conception of writing is in contradistinction to the traditional notion of writing as an activity whose objective is to “master” a subject, to possess it, to pin it down. It is precisely this phallographic preoccupation with mastery, says Lyotard, that has impelled philosophy as a mode of discourse into “such extreme crisis today.” The compulsion to master by erecting huge systems of answers, the “search for a constituting order that gives meaning to the world,” makes the philosopher “a secret accomplice of the phallograt.” This is why he does not perceive his own writings to be “academic”; academic discourse entails what Lacan called “the discourse of the master,” and Lyotard is not about to set himself up as a master, “just a perpetual student.” Instead, what is needed in philosophy, in the sciences, in life is “perpetual displacement of questions” so that “answering is never achieved.” Since questions always already carry within them their own answers, are always “interested,” it is the act itself of questioning, of remaining open, that is most useful to Lyotard. And so, an “answer” is only interesting in so far as it is a new question.

Thus, for example, philosophical inquiry about questions of gender is only useful when it is not attempting to stabilize gender categories or provide answers; such questions necessarily have no answers. In fact, Lyotard believes that our approach to questions of gender should be “precisely like” how he conceives the act of writing—as questions posed without attempts to answer or master: “Maybe that’s the best homage we can give to the gender

question—to write.” Thus, “the differences between the sexes isn’t the most important problem,” and attempts to associate masculinity with aggressiveness and femininity with passivity are “very very stupid.” A more interesting issue is the relative “importance given to the body as such by both sexes.” Philosophical—that is, male—discourse has tended to repress and externalize a “bodily way of thinking,” to be suspicious of those who acknowledge emotions and bodily states, whereas “women are more sensitive” to these factors, according to Lyotard. What is needed, he suggests here and elsewhere, is to move away from a discourse of mastery and abstract cognition toward a way of being that recognizes affect, the body, and openness—a posture he defines as “feminine.” Hence, Lyotard perceives “a strong relationship” between “the ability to write in *this* sense and what I could call ‘femininity’ because there is a sort of openness to something unknown without any project to master it.” For Lyotard, the opposite of a discourse of mastery is “passivity,” the “ability to wait for, not to look at, but to wait for—for what, precisely, we don’t know.” It is this very “refusal of the temptation to grasp, to master” that, says Lyotard, is “femininity to me, real femininity.”

It is perhaps somewhat curious that a former Marxist, someone who devoted fifteen years of his life to socialist activism, could find writing and academic work incompatible with social activism, especially during a time when many are contending that the two are or should be integrally related. Yet, Lyotard claims to have taken up writing and scholarly work as a kind of “mourning” brought on by the realization that “militant activity was no longer effective.” In fact, he is highly skeptical of organized resistance in general. Resistance, “in the usual sense of another policy or another politics,” is not a viable alternative to the “system” because organized resistance, though sometimes necessary for checks and balances, eventually becomes absorbed into the system. True resistance, whether in educational reform or another kind of reform, is “up to each of us,” to individuals. True resistance is much like “the capacity for people . . . to ‘write’ in the sense we used just before.” For example, those scientists and philosophers of science like Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway who are interested in challenging the patriarchal domination of scientific method and epistemology can resist by adopting the same kind of “feminine,” “postmodern,” “writing” posture Lyotard describes throughout this interview.

Besides changing his position on socialist activism, Lyotard has revised a number of his former positions. He no longer uses Wittgenstein’s language game model, substituting for it his own concept of “phrase making.” And despite numerous earlier works arguing that capital is “the main problem in today’s society,” the “problem that overshadows all the others,” he is quick to defend the capitalist system as “the only solution.” For Lyotard, the capitalist system competed against and won out over all other systems, demonstrating itself superior in a kind of political/economic survival of the

fittest. Preventing developing countries and emerging democracies from embracing capitalism is misguided because people need to be able “to eat, to work, to sleep, to have a home.” Only when a certain degree of economic self-sufficiency emerges among the people can “real resistance” occur. This position is in keeping with Lyotard’s general privileging of “openness” and his suspicion of certainty because he sees democracy as flexible and open, “a political system in which the connections must adjust day by day, perpetually working to invent something new.”

In addition to his discussion of true writing as a kind of “feminine” openness and passivity (what he terms “passibility”), Lyotard makes several comments about feminism. While he agrees that feminism is a postmodernist discourse (or, as he says, “*postmodernism is feminist*”), he has an uneasy relationship with the French feminists. He claims to have been “horrified” by a certain conference paper presented by Luce Irigaray but admires the work of Hélène Cixous, seeing it as related to the writings of Gertrude Stein. And he is adamant that competition is not a “male” trait, as some have posited; rather, he views competition as central to all forms of life and social organization. We may “hate” the fact that this is so, but we must realize nonetheless that “we are in this condition.” For Lyotard, sexual difference is not merely a matter of biology: “it’s something else, quite mysterious, which is incorporated in each of us.” Disagreements over such issues have made him feel that he has “no clear relationship with feminists,” even though he supports various feminist causes.

It can’t go without note that despite Lyotard’s campaign against mastery and certitude he himself fails to escape such a discourse in this interview. He uses strong declarative sentences and is very definite in his views. Words such as *precisely* (which occurs nineteen times), *impossible* (fourteen times), *obvious*, and *exactly* saturate his discourse. Often he declares, “it’s true that,” and once he says, “There is no argument. There is no doubt.” Such language is incommensurate with that of someone who insists that we must escape traditional, patriarchal discourse. Yet, perhaps this incongruity only underscores Lyotard’s own point that we constantly need to invent new vocabularies so as not to remain trapped by those that already have a hold on us. And despite Lyotard’s caution against stabilizing gender categories (“it’s very very stupid”), he himself appears to have fairly fixed notions of femininity and masculinity.

Nevertheless, Lyotard does provide substantial insight into many concerns, and his views on culture, feminism, postmodernism, and writing are potentially useful to many of us. His redefinition of writing, whether or not we agree that it is “feminine,” seems a sensible stance in the postmodern world.

- Q. In *Peregrinations* you describe how at the age of fourteen you “began to write poems, essays, short stories, and, later still, a novel” but immediately gave up writing after “the only woman in whom I had confidence decided I was not a true writer.” Despite this early disappointment, you’ve gone on to write an impressive number of important books and essays. Do you now consider yourself a writer?
- A. No, I don’t consider myself a writer. That’s a good question though because I’m trying to find the appropriate term for the way I write in the general sense. A writer is somebody like Claude Simon or Beckett. *They* are writers. That’s to say, they are progressing in a space, a field (but it’s not a field) in which they don’t know what they have to write. They are confronted with the unknown, and that’s to say they are really confronted with language itself. There is a sort of fight, a battle with and against words and sentences and phrases, and that’s beautiful and terrible work in a sense, and I admire it. But for my part, I remain a philosopher. Even if sometimes I write in *this* sense—trying to grasp the word to express (I don’t like this expression: *express*), to fix a certain word, a certain way of composing a phrase—nevertheless, I still remain a philosopher. That is, I’m guided by meaning, and being guided by meaning means maintaining a certain idea of mastering the material, which is the old philosophical tradition. And it seems to me that this is a poverty and a misery. So, I’m between these two ways of writing. I could say I write in a certain way in which what is implied is necessarily the consciousness of what I have to mean. I could use the term “reflexive writing,” though I have no definition of it, but you know what I mean.
- Q. In that same book you say that the idea that writing “pretends to be complete,” that it presumes to “build a system of total knowledge” about something, “constitutes *par excellence* the sin, the arrogance of the mind.” In a postmodern world, how *should* we view the role of writing?
- A. In the postmodern world, we have to separate writing as a cultural effect and writing as writing. You can take a book as a cultural object and finally test it as having a large audience or as being understandable—as being a poor work or the opposite, a brilliant one. That’s the postmodern appreciation of the works of mind (if I can use this term), of thought, but it seems to me that writing is the opposite: writing is the capacity to resist the network of exchanges in which cultural objects are commodities, and maybe to write is precisely to avoid making a book (or even a small paper or article) a commodity, but rather to oppose, to resist the simple and naive exchangeability of things in our world. That’s to say, to write is necessarily to allude to something else which is not easily communicated. It doesn’t mean that a work is difficult to read; it could be very simple, but it alludes to something else.
- Q. For fifteen years while a member of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, you gave up all writing except for that devoted to this activist group. You comment

that your return to “real (?) writing in the mid-sixties was a sign that my militancy had passed and another mode of legitimation was being searched for.” Do you find academic work to be incompatible with social activism?

A. I don’t know because I have no experience with academic work. That’s true; that’s my fate or my destiny, my incapacity. This is so even when I started to write: it was the book called *Discours, figure*, and though it was presented as a dissertation, it wasn’t an academic book at all. Even the title was considered bizarre to academic people. I remember two colleagues in the university (it was Nanterre University at that time) looking at the pamphlet announcing the book and saying, “What is this title? It’s impossible. This is a dissertation, *Discours, figure*?” In a certain sense, I have no real experience of the academy. I was always a teacher; even now (and I’m at retirement age) I continue for personal reasons to teach, and I like it. In a certain sense, I was very engaged in the direct relationship with young people, with students. But the idea of creating an academic work is not mine because it entails what Lacan called “the discourse of the master,” and I’m not about to take myself as a master, just a perpetual student, a child.

Q. But do you find the work that you do engage in to be compatible with social activism?

A. No, it was impossible for me because my activism was a complete activism. It wasn’t simply being a card-carrying member of the party. I was completely engaged twenty-four hours a day because we had to do everything, not only to write but to print, to distribute, to defend, to go to factory entrances in order to distribute pamphlets, to manifest, to make public our meetings in order to propose or to defend our ideas or our analysis about capitalist society and Stalinist society. So it was continual work; it was impossible for me to engage in real academic or even writing activity. When I turned to the book *Discours, figure*, it was a break in my life in a certain sense. Or, rather, this break was what made me capable of having a different life. That is, my writing started, around the middle of the sixties, as the giving up of a political perspective. I realized at that moment that the basis of my political perspective—that is, an alternative to the dominance of capitalist arrangement or organization of things—was impossible, and that there was not another subject, a real and authentic subject. What was called “the proletariat” by Marx didn’t exist finally—except as an idea, and the idea was linked to a general metaphysics, the modern metaphysics which makes or made political life in Western countries a sort of tragedy, a battle, a fight between the false subject, capital, and the real one, the proletariat. So, I started to write as a sort of mourning, as a despair, the necessity to come back to these stupid activities because, finally, militant activity was no longer effective.

Q. You suggest in *The Postmodern Condition* that in postindustrial society “disciplines disappear,” “universities lose their function,” “the specula-

tive hierarchy of learning gives way,” and the death knell of “the age of the Professor” is sounded. How should the postmodern academy be reconstituted? What should its objectives be?

- A. I don’t know. That’s an enormous question. What happened is that the modern academy was conceived at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Berlin—which is the general pattern for every university in the world except in England and France, presumably for different reasons; but elsewhere that’s the pattern, the Berlin Academy, built in 1810—and this institution was built in the spirit that one could cover all knowledge with a hierarchy of disciplines, and at that time the top of the mountain was philology. The institution was created in order to produce enlightened citizens, according to the goal of the *Aufklärung* [Enlightenment]. Today, this is no longer the point. The point is to produce people able to work in the system and to produce good work, effective work, to gain competence in their part of the general field. That’s to say, there’s a sort of sophistication of the capacity to work and to give the system what it needs. The evidence doesn’t necessarily demonstrate that the people are enlightened at all. You can be an excellent physicist or computer engineer without any general ideal. “Enlightenment” doesn’t matter; it’s not relevant in this way. So, there is a sort of disbalance between the old ideal of the academy and the real task it has to do now, and I don’t know if it is possible to reform it. It seems to me that this is one of the effects of the so-called postmodern situation, the fact that the purpose of knowledge has completely changed.
- Q. In “Endurance and the Profession” and in an interview in *Diacritics*, you suggest that the alternative to the grand Enlightenment narrative of education as emancipation is education as resistance—resistance against the academic genres of discourse, against the great narratives themselves, and “against every object of thought which is given to be grasped through some ‘obvious’ delimitation, method, or end.” Given the intense pressures in postindustrial society in the postmodern age to commodify knowledge and to transform universities into servants of the technocracy, how can such resistance be fostered successfully?
- A. It’s up to each of us. Resistance is not an alternative, properly speaking, in the usual sense of another policy or another politics. It is impossible to base politics on the notion of resistance. It could be very dangerous in that that’s the *old* tradition. What was Marxism in the nineteenth century? It was a politics of resistance. Now we know the effects of such politics because it is politics; that’s all. A political approach to this problem of resistance is completely wrong. It’s impossible to make a front of a resistance party. There is no resistance party because if it is a party, it is no longer resistant; it is a part of the system and in concert with the system. And that’s good. I’ve nothing against it because it is necessary to have at least two parties in order to correct the system itself. Today in all developing societies, that’s the general situation: to have two parties in

order to balance the correction of arrangements or fitness of the system itself. Maybe we can imagine resistance in terms of the capacity for people (I don't know if it's for all people; I'm not so "rousseauist") to "write" in the sense we used just before: to advance or want something that is not clear, and to discover a means of giving testimony of that which is precisely not yet included in the circulation of commodities; it is not yet known. It seems to me that this is active resistance, not in the sense of a *resistance armée* but in the sense of to wait for, to be passive. It seems to me that the job is to write toward something appealing but to be honorable enough to specify what kind of thing this thing is appealing to—that is, to resist the already done, the already written, the already thought, that's to say precisely commodities, even in the philosophical world or literary field.

Q. You've commented, "Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games." It is clear from your work that you don't share the fears of those who predict that such "fragmentation" will erode social bonds to such an extent that there is no longer any recognizable cultural coherence; however, do you believe that such eclecticism can actually serve to *strengthen* social bonds in the postmodern age?

A. This eclecticism can completely change the nature of social bonds. That's the point. Yesterday we were entertaining a candidate for an assistant professor position, and we had a long discussion about cultures and cultural multiplicity. (You know, that's an American academic topic now. I don't know why because you *are* the country of multicultural status *par excellence*. It could be a problem for a French man or woman, but for an American, it's obvious that there is something like multiculturalism here. Okay, that's your privilege. And I like it.) What is changing is the fact that in a certain sense, cultural difference—that is, a certain formation, organization, shaping of traditional social relationships—is suddenly broken up by this enormous system and at the same time is recognized by it. "That's Japanese food, and so on." But it is recognized precisely as something already pushed out, already gone. There's sort of a perverse (not perverse but a traditional) pleasure in tasting these cultural differences precisely as something coming from the past but that are still there though about to disappear, more or less, to be integrated into the system of commodities in the system. The notion of what was called one people as such is disappearing, it seems to me. Instead of different peoples, we are moving to a general notion of "the population," which is completely different. This population is not nothing. It's really quite interesting, but it means that there are a lot of common traits, common features in the ways of living and in ways of thinking. For example, this highway out the window in Atlanta is the same as in Frankfurt or Tokyo, exactly the same, and that's

interesting. So, the minimal bond is given by the system itself as the necessity to exchange. It's impossible to maintain the system without each person, each singularity, having something to give and something to take—to give to others, to take from others. You can imagine this as a salary, an honorarium, whatever; that's a minimal bond. This is a remarkable bond in a certain sense because this necessity to exchange is precisely inscribed in speech itself. Speech includes the notion of a "you" and an "I," and what the system makes with this structure is to develop or to enlarge or to extend it in the sense that this move back and forth can be symbolized by money. Money tends to be a symbolic representation of the bond. It gives the system enormous flexibility. Finally, in a certain sense, what you have to say to me or what I have to say to you isn't relevant; what is relevant is the fact of the pragmatic relationship. That's the minimal bond, but presumably there is persistent need for closer or more affective sentimental feeling felt by the relationship. The question is about affects, feelings; but that's another question.

Q. Along these lines, you point out that with the commodification of knowledge, "increasingly, the central question is becoming who will have access" to information and the machines that generate and store it. Thus, for example, in the language games of science, "whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being right." Do you believe the Clinton administration's planned "information superhighway" will help democratize access to information or further limit access to an elite group of technocrats?

A. I'm not aware of the specifics of Clinton's information superhighway, but I have read about it. It seems to me that my answer could be both. To democratize, to give access to easier communication for everybody, is a remarkable ideal; that's exactly what I mean about the system; that's confirmation of this poor hypothesis which is now obvious to everybody. At the same time, this new highway's network necessarily must be controlled by hypertechnocrats, necessarily. You can represent them in terms of technicians, but at the same time everybody knows that these technicians are political. They are not completely neutral. Nevertheless, it can work in this way, and I think that finally there is not an alternative between the two hypotheses, the two answers, democratic or technocratic, because what we call "democratic" today necessarily is technocratic.

Q. In *The Postmodern Condition* you claim that as we increasingly become an information society, the nature of knowledge is radically transformed, becoming principally an "informational commodity." Are there any *advantages* to the commodification of knowledge, or will this process simply continue to serve the state and the military-industrial complex?

A. It's not only the state and the military-industrial complex. The state is different today because it's the servant of the system. What's the political class now? Just the community of people having certain ideas, promoting certain ideas, about the way the system must be adjusted in order to bring

about more performance, in order to optimize results, the output. The state is not so important in a certain sense. That's very strange, but the notion of the state (and the military-industrial complex) is in a certain sense going to be obsolete it seems to me (I mean the old national state) because even the boundaries of nations are more and more obstacles to the development of the system. That's to say, the state linked with nations is too ridiculously small. And the second answer to your question, which is quite difficult in a certain sense, is that presumably it's too rapid to characterize the nature of knowledge now in terms of informational commodity. It's true for a lot of scientific results, and you can see on television the exhibition of these commodities and their aftereffects on everyday life; they're important. That's okay. But at the same time, science is science. That's to say, first there are rules in order to assume that certain effects are established. It's impossible to say whatever proposition you can invent. And second, there is a particularly strong system of discourse with rules for forming propositions, for establishing evidence in this so-called reality, and for speaking a language understandable to other members of the community. It's a sort of special community with its rules and its habits. And also, and more important, science is science in the sense that sometimes something happens—an event, invention, discovery; it doesn't matter what terms we use in order to signify the fact that there are sometimes big changes in science, what Kuhn called paradigm shifts—and in this sense science escapes the condition of just making informational commodities because the new paradigm, the new way of representing a part of the world, is immediately obscure for the scientific community because it's a new language and it takes time for the community to integrate it. Remember, for example, Einstein's first small article about relativity, published in a very small review in Zurich. It was completely ignored by the scientific community, but that was the departure point of a new way of speaking of the cosmos. This aspect is more or less analogous to invention in the arts. To answer the final question, are there any advantages? Yes, of course. The advantage is enormous, and the evidence is that this system is the most performative system in the history of humanity. And that's the final cause; it won against all challenges. It's due to the fact that scientific results were spread out over the community.

- Q. Drawing on Wittgenstein's language games, you characterize the communication process as falling within "the domain of a general agonistics," and in numerous places you develop this idea using such language as "playing to win," "a feeling of success won at the expense of an adversary," and so on. Even though you have since abandoned the language game model for one of "phrase making," this theme of agonistics still permeates your work. How do you respond to criticism that in its emphasis on competition an agonistic conception of communication is a distinctly *male* model and as such may not account for how the process works with all individuals?

A. That's quite strange to me because such a question presupposes certain assumptions I do not share. First, the agonistics I was referring to was not agonistic between people. That's a general mistake about this question of the *différend*: it's not agonistic between people; it's agonistic between language games or genres of discourse. I prefer to use the term *différend* because the term *game* is equivocal to me. It's impossible to translate as the connection of a series of phrases organized in order to produce a move in the audience. For example, a tragic dialogue is impossible to translate in an informational way of writing, in terms of cognitive discourse, because the way sentences or phrases are organized in the tragic play precisely makes certain effects, produces certain products, so that the so-called translation in terms of an informational paper or cognitive discourse necessarily loses the specifically tragic effect. There is a real *différend*. There is no language game or genre or discourse which is able to encompass all the different discourses or genres, and there is a real *différend* in which no court or tribunal is able to decide what is best because there is no best way. You can prefer informational or cognitive discourse over tragic discourse, but it's undecided. So, that's the way I understand the *différend*. It's not a *différend* between people because each of us is able to produce different ways of discoursing, of speaking, of writing, more or less. The *différend* is internal to any subjectivity.

Second, competition is not competition between different groups in a cultural reality. Not at all. The notion of competition as a "male" model is a notion I reject, maybe because I am a male, but, in fact, because there is not any other way to understand the domination of the competitive pattern in our society. I mean, this system has competed against all other systems, all the other ways of organizing human communities. And we can consider human history not as a linear succession with a sort of causality between each segment of this line, but as the opposite, as the contingent and different ways in which human communities have tried to organize—exactly in the same terms that so-called life has fortuitously produced different forms of living beings. And between these different entities—animals, vegetables, human beings, or human communities—competition was necessarily open. They are all open systems; they need to grasp energy from outside in order to maintain themselves, and if they have to grasp energy from outside, they are competitive with other systems. That's true for animals, even vegetables, and for human communities. And that's how our system, now, won against other ways that communities have tried to organize themselves, and it has internalized competition itself in order to continue to be able to grasp outside and inside energies as much as possible. It's not a male idea; there is no argument against it. There is no doubt: it's not a male idea. And I'm sure women are perfectly able to understand this, even if they hate it; so do I. But we are in this condition.

- Q. Speaking of competition, if we adopt a vigilance against master narratives, won't we run the risk of erasing the narratives of marginalized groups, such as African Americans, in their own struggles for emancipation?
- A. If we are vigilant against master narratives, it means precisely that we try to consider the small narratives of specific groups. It seems to me that what was so impressive in the development of anthropology in Western countries, for example, is the discovery that there are a lot of grand narratives; even if these grand narratives were grand narratives for small communities, they still were grand narratives—mythologies, religions, beliefs, and so on. And that was precisely one of the reasons for destroying or at least disturbing our own belief in the grand narrative of emancipation, or even redemption in the Christian tradition. It seems to me that there is now a sort of comprehension of the so-called multiple ways of understanding the meaning of communities in Africa, South America, North America, India, Russia, or Asia, and so to be vigilant against grand narratives is precisely to be prudent and aware of the capacity for human communities to have different ways of narrating their stories. It's not destroying these narratives, and it's not necessarily protecting them; it's just respecting them.
- Q. You express concern in "Universal History and Cultural Differences" that some of your earlier works, including *The Postmodern Condition*, might appear to privilege narrative over other discursive genres even while it is useful to examine certain "great questions" in historical—that is, *narrative*—terms. You also caution that it is "tempting to lend credence to the great narrative of the decline of great narratives." Do you believe the vocabulary of narratives has outlived its explanatory usefulness and that what is needed is a new vocabulary (in the Rortian sense)?
- A. We need new vocabularies all the time, forever. It's a part of the way the system is developing. *It* needs new vocabularies. It's very eager to grasp new vocabularies. Even the resistant work of writers or artists is grasped or memorized by the system because, in short, maybe it can be used. So we need new vocabulary. But as to the question of narrative itself, in my earlier works, yes, I presumably give a sort of privilege to the narrative way of speaking and writing with the sense that that's the basis of any entrance into language. For me, narrative is a childish way, the first way. I have a son who is eight years old (that's already old), and I remember the way in which he grasped information and immediately put it into a small narrative. It's a sort of immediate "composition" (as you would say) of the meaning. Finding the relation between two meaning units is spontaneously a narrative way. And is it possible to overcome? Is it necessary to overcome? No. I think that is very interesting; that's something very mysterious in a certain sense. Take, for example, writers such as James Joyce or even Gertrude Stein or Claude Simon. They are considered to be trying to destroy traditional narratives or a narrative way of writing. That's true in a certain sense; but at the same time, there is a complex, complexified

and perverted submission to narrative itself, making narrative *more* important than it is in the traditional fable. It seems to me that there is a resistance of narrative presumably linked with our childhood, with infancy, the space/time during which we were unable to speak but during which we were already capable of having narrative without speaking, if I can say that. (That's my hypothesis, if you'll excuse me.)

- Q. In *Cultural Critique* and elsewhere you propose that "the main problem in today's society," the "problem that overshadows all the others," is not the contemporary state but capital. In light of the turn to market economies by China, Russia, Eastern Block nations, and, now, even Cuba to a certain extent, how do we resist capitalism and its corrosive effect on the social fabric?
- A. Impossible. And we have no reason to resist because all these people are looking to capitalism as a solution to their problems. I was in Petersburg last spring, and it was horrible to see all these people—very nice people—without work, without money, and they are just waiting for capitalist investment in order to make things supportable. There is obviously no other solution, except the ridiculous and dangerous solution proposed by this crazy man, this neo-nazi, Zhirinovsky. Capitalism is the only solution. Obviously, the same is true in China with a different way to manage the entrance into capitalism. No, no. This system has no competition, and to resist it is not to make impediments against it, as in the old tradition. No, no. It's to make the people able to eat, to work, to sleep, to have a home, and so on. And in *these* conditions, real resistance can appear.
- Q. You've written, "Capital seems to actualize the ideal of reproduction of men by themselves. . . . Women disappear into the male cycle, integrated either as workers into the production of commodities, or as mothers into the reproduction of labour power, or again as commodities themselves (cover-girls, prostitutes of mass-media, hostesses of *human relations*), or even as administrators of capital (managerial functions)." Although capitalism colludes with and is coextensive with patriarchy, isn't it patriarchy itself with its phallocratic order that is the primary operating force in the subjugation of women? That is, do you think it is possible to envision a non-patriarchal or even feminist capitalist society?
- A. Presumably patriarchy is in fact the way the system started. It's not so simple historically speaking. Patriarchy is clearly the basis of the Roman theory of the law, which is the basis of our society, even if these rules have changed. And it was clearly patriarchal. But if you consider the communities of north Europe—Scandinavia, Germany—it was not the case, and there was not so much patriarchy, and women are in a completely different place and have a completely different status in these communities: they're more important, very important. And the rules of family, relatives, relationships with relatives, are completely different. But that's not

relevant. Your question assumes that women are in possession of a feminine principle and that men are inhabited exclusively by a male way of thinking and doing. This is a prejudice. That's why I have no clear relationship with feminists. It seems to me after having read Freud, and not only Freud but also feminist psychoanalytic writers, that sex difference is not only biological difference, nor social studies difference; it's something else, quite mysterious, which is incorporated in each of us, women or men, a difference which is internal, a capacity. I will give you a simple example. Women are able to be managers in the system; they are capable of being turned into commodities in the system, as you say. Men are too: for example, a great baseball player is turned into a commodity, obviously—or even a president. So, it is not the plight of women as such to be changed into consumable commodities. Returning to the idea of writing in a general sense and to resisting by writing, I think that there is a strong relationship, an obscure relationship, between the ability to write in *this* sense and what I could call “femininity” because there is a sort of openness to something unknown without any project to master it, but, rather, the opposite: to work on it. As a male, I represent this attitude as feminine. And I'm sure it's not a job of “composition” (if you'll excuse me), because in composition there is a sort of mastering, of putting things together so as to order them. It seems to me that the opposite is the ability to be weak, a good weakness, so-called passivity. I don't mind this term, though I tried to propose the term *passibility*. In this certain representation we can have the way of thinking in Zen Buddhism or certain Eastern philosophies or religions: the ability to wait for, not to look at, but to wait for—for what, precisely, we don't know. That's my ideological representation of the necessary attitude for writing. When somebody like Flaubert said, “I *am* Madame Bovary,” it was not a joke; it was recognizing that he had not only to *be* the character, but to be a *woman* in order to write. The same with Proust. I know a lot of painters—some of them are very great artists—and I recognize their refusal of the temptation to grasp, to master, but the opposite, their acceptance *not* to know as the event they need in order to *paint*. It's an event not to know. It's good; there's no prejudice. That's femininity to me, real femininity. There's presumably unbalanced repetition of this femininity with masculinity in women and men, but I know women who are more male than I am.

- Q. But if that's true, if this principle about refusing to try to grasp is a feminine principle, if you want to call it that, perhaps feminism and capitalism *are* incompatible because the capitalist way is to grasp—in very real terms.
- A. Maybe. But at the same time, capitalism as a system has the function, and nobody says why, to optimize its performances. And if we continue to represent the question in terms of input and output (because performance is that: a certain rate of energy input in the system, a rate of energy output), the question is already closed: the question is to grasp. But if you consider

the internal arrangement, the internal management of the system, which is something very very complex, the condition for optimizing performance is to complexify the relationship, the general enormous network inside the system, and at that moment maybe it's important for the system to renounce the need to grasp and to master, to open blank fields, blank places, empty spaces, in order to let events happen. For example, coming back to a previous question, what is marvelous in the university is precisely that when the university is good, it leaves open certain parts, renouncing the need to program everything, saying, "Okay, I'll give you three hours a week and you can program for yourself. You have a certain idea? Go and try to invent something else; let the unknown come and try to make it written" (as is your case). And it seems to me that the system is less and less strong and rigid and with complexification. It needs a certain flexibility, and this flexibility is sort of a play between parts of the system and necessarily implies empty places in which the connections are not already made. Finally, we continue to call democracy "democracy" because it is precisely a political system in which the connections must adjust day by day, perpetually working to invent something new. I'm not claiming that democracy is a way of writing, but there is a certain relationship between the flexibility of the two. And it seems to me that in this sense, there is a chance for femininity.

- Q. In "One Thing at Stake in Women's Struggles," you posit that "the philosopher, as philosopher, is a secret accomplice of the phallocrat" because philosophy is "the search for a constituting order that gives meaning to the world." Thus, when philosophers specifically consider the *question* of men's relationship to women, philosophy sends them in search of "an answer"; and, furthermore, the answer itself is "preceded by the *constitution*, itself a regulated elaboration, of this relationship." Certainly you don't mean to suggest that because philosophy "is already the language of masculinity" we should not interrogate gender. How can we escape this problematic and produce useful inquiry about gender and gender relations?
- A. Yes, I was right. No, I think that's very important because finally the phallocratic master is not really capital itself, which is something more complex and perverse. The master was the philosopher in the traditional culture of Western countries, and that's to say, in the term I used, is able "to answer." I ask a question, and reason, the logos, whatever you can imagine, is able to answer. There is something like this in the sciences in the beginning of their history, but now scientists are more timid and prudent in the matter of questions and answers. They are more complex in the way questions are asked and answers can be given to questions. There's sort of a sense now in the sciences that there is perpetual displacement of questions and that answering is never achieved. That's good, and intelligent. But in traditional philosophy this wasn't the case. The people

there have the idea that they should build an enormous system of questioning and answering in order to find a system of answers. This is *mastering*, to make language work exclusively for answering, which is a very perverse notion of language. Or even if they were able to answer because they were very intelligent—Plato or Aristotle or even Spinoza—even if they gave a large space to answering a question, the question was asked in the way it had to be answered. That is, the general structure, the form, the start of the use of language was under the edges of this question and its answers. That's the reason I don't like the term *agonistic*. At the end of a lecture is the moment of *Q* and *A*. It seems to me dangerous and ridiculous in a certain sense, though necessary. Going back to your question, one of the reasons philosophy properly speaking is in such extreme crisis today (I mean philosophy as a way of discourse) is precisely the fact that certain of the so-called philosophers (maybe Rorty, maybe Davidson, not only the so-called continental philosophers but some of the American philosophers) are asking the question, "Is it right to reduce thinking to a game of questioning and answering with the idea that an answer is possible?" I remember a text by Franz Kafka in which he explains that what is so marvelous is the fact that generally speaking a question is in fact already an answer; it implies in it an answer. A question is not naive; it comes from the previous answer. And what is called "the answer" is only interesting as far as it is a question. That is a good description of what it is to write, as Gertrude Stein has said.

- Q. So to produce useful inquiry about gender, then, one should still question but not with the objective of necessarily producing an answer about gender and gender relations?
- A. I think that it's impossible. The enormous, extreme, huge importance of the question of gender is precisely that this question has no answer, and that's the only way we can continue to think about it: I try to elaborate, to place femininity and masculinity, but I already know that my answer is a bad one. It's certainly false. It's immediately suspect. And that's good; that's the way we have to approach this question. But this question is enormous; it's a paramount question for somebody who wishes not only to live and to exist but also to think or to write. In a certain sense, you can imagine writing as precisely like how this question of gender is posed and never answered. Maybe that's the best homage we can give to the gender question—to write.
- Q. You claim in "One Thing at Stake in Women's Struggles" that safeguarding sexual difference, or even emphasizing it as some feminists attempt, is not a useful strategy for bringing about a less sexist culture because "the 'difference between the sexes' is no more exempt from masculine imperialism than its opposite." You suggest instead a scenario in which "another sexual space could be substituted, a topology of erotic potentialities" in which "differences traverse individual bodies rather than opposing a

'woman's' body to 'man's.'" Would you elaborate on this scenario?

- A. In a certain way, I already answered this question. The difference between sexes isn't the most important problem, and we can see that today with the development of homosexual claims. I mean by this that the problem isn't, "I'm a male and you're a female or the reverse," but that we should consider that maybe as a biological or social male I'm also a female. And what does this mean? That's the question. If I have to elaborate this scenario, the question is, "What does it mean?" Is it an opposition as I suggested? Which is very wrong in a certain sense. Does it mean that a male is aggressive and active and a female is passive? No, I think that's very very stupid. An interesting question could be the importance given to the body as such by both sexes. It seems clear, obvious, that in the sexist, phallographic way of thinking what is remarkable is the absence of the body as such. Philosophical discourse, for example, but also entrepreneurial discourse, is exempted from any inference of bodily states. It's forbidden, it's a shame, it's trouble, and there's suspicion against people, males often, precisely when the bodily states, bodily gestures, emotions, cries, laughter, affective expressions are present. It seems that the relation femininity has with the body is completely different. I remember a question my second daughter asked me (she is a philosopher): "Why is there no female philosopher in the Western tradition? There are female writers, artists, and so on, but not philosophers." That's an interesting point. It seems to me the answer is because in philosophy there is a repression of the bodily way of thinking. By "bodily way of thinking" I mean the old difference between *anima* and *animus*. *Anima* is a way of thinking, but in which aesthetical impressions are taken into account; and *animus*, the opposite, is probably a discourse, a language, sustaining itself by itself with no external reference to the body. There is a sort of externalization of the body implied in philosophical discourse. But if you consider our real way of being, the body is here not as an organism but as an addresser of phrases, unarticulated phrases, but as an addresser. And it's impossible not to listen to it; it's sometimes oppressive. It seems to me that women are more sensitive to that. That's their privilege.
- Q. Sandra Harding and other scholars interested in feminist epistemology have argued that since knowledge is socially situated, the traditional methods, values, and objectives of science are biased according to class, race, and gender. She argues that beginning scientific research from women's experience enables feminism "to produce empirically more accurate descriptions and theoretically richer explanations than does conventional research." What are your thoughts about this "feminist standpoint theory"?
- A. I have to read Sandra Harding. I think it's interesting; I have nothing against it. I can't easily imagine what she means by introducing women's experiences into the theory of sciences. The question becomes, "Is it

starting with women's experience by women scholars in a scientific community, or is it starting with women's experiences in terms of general experience?" Returning to what we were just talking about, it means something which is precisely the introduction into scientific research of a certain capacity to "write" in the general sense. A certain "*passibility*," a certain way of coming to what is unknown, a sort of patience with the necessity to answer, rejecting the necessity to have results immediately or as soon as possible. That's to say, not the competitive way. If it is in this way that she's writing of women's experience and feminist standpoint theory, consider the case of Einstein, for example. The most important part of his life was devoted to the violin, which was a feminine experience. And the result was marvelous. I just remarked that in scientific work we have to mentally separate the need to just answer questions and produce cognitive commodities—which is one thing, a necessary thing—and the ability to reform and refound new representations of a field, maybe a very small part of one field, maybe an enormous part. This is the capacity to let ourselves say, "But the question is not well asked; let me receive another question through the question which was asked." Say you, a member of my scientific community, male or female, ask me a question, or the field is asking me a question, and maybe this question is bad because it belongs to a certain representation of this field. Perhaps *that's* the representation to be changed, in which case I have to wait for, not elaborate but diselaborate.

Q. Sandra Harding says in our interview with her that in her view "feminism is a postmodernism," while African American feminist bell hooks has criticized postmodern thought for exclusionary strategies, despite its ostensible commitment to difference, otherness, and the "deconstruction of 'master narratives.'" What is your view of the relationship of feminism to postmodern thought?

A. She said feminism is a postmodernism? She is right. I understand what she means. The African American feminist said the opposite? Why? Because *postmodernism* is an equivocal term. It can signify the exaggeration of modernism in a sort of male aggravation of the domination of the discourse and of mastering things; that's what we said about the system. But at the same time, as far as this system has to be complexified, and let open certain zones, in this way feminism can grow inside the system as a way for the system to understand that another way of thinking and operating is possible, and more flexible. In this sense, *postmodernism* is *feminist*—can be feminist, in the good sense of this term.

Q. Except for occasional references to Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, you rarely mention the work of the French feminists in your own work. Do you not find French feminist thought useful to your own lines of inquiry?

A. Useful, certainly. Cixous must be; *it* must be. In fact, I've known both of them for a long time. I admire certain books written by Hélène. And I had a strong discussion, even dispute, with Luce at an international conference

in France at Cerisy. She gave a paper, and I was horrified. The paper was truly feminist, but in a sense I can't accept at all, and we had a strong dispute—a friendly dispute, but strong. Generally speaking, I have good relations with them as persons, but it's true that I've not made real use of their works. I don't know why, frankly. Perhaps it was too late for me, I don't know. I have a stronger relationship with the work of Gertrude Stein. My question to you could be, "Does a feminist woman or man consider Gertrude Stein to be a feminist writer?" This seems to me a real question because in a certain sense I consider some works written by H  l  ne to be very close to Gertrude Stein's papers or books. It seems to me that the way Gertrude is working through the traditional phrasing of discourse, which is more or less the same way H  l  ne does, is in a certain sense, properly speaking, feminist—in the sense that we've been talking about. If you open the *Diff  rend* (which is a terrible book, a horrible book), there are "notices" on Kant and Levinas and Plato and Aristotle disseminated throughout the book, and there is a notice on Gertrude Stein—a montage of quotations and two or three questions at the end of this very brief notice. In particular, I asked the question, "Is this what they call feminist writing?" I think it is.

Q. In a recent interview and in some of his published writings, British logician Stephen Toulmin says that "Lyotard and such people are really rejecting Descartes for Cartesian reasons," that "in the postmodern age we don't need to replace 'rationality' with 'absurdity.'" What is your response to this comment?

A. Are the two sentences compatible? If I'm rejecting Descartes for Cartesian reasons, it isn't to replace rationality with absurdity; it's to replace rationality with another rationality. That's a Cartesian reason. If it is to replace rationality with absurdity, my reasons would not be Cartesian. That's just his *mauvaise humeur* [bad mood]. The fear of replacing rationality with some kind of absurdity was the objection made by Habermas, for example, in the old days, but now he's changing because he is starting to understand what we are doing. I consider myself a completely rational thinker. Excuse me for this horrible flaw. I like the sciences. I try to read and open my ears to what is coming from the sciences. And I have a way of thinking that is completely rational—too much so. You know, I struggle against my rationality. So I insist on what is escaping any rational discourse precisely in order to open a space for writing, but at the same time it is because this rational discourse impresses a weight on me that's in fact enormous. I'm very comfortable with the opportunity to work with scientists. I was in the biology laboratory at the *Institut Pasteur* in the old days when the scientists were working on DNA. It was beautiful. I understood the job of building a discourse of knowledge. It was fascinating. Presumably my first orientation could have been in this direction. Okay, that's of no importance, but you can take this notion of absurdity in

a very different way than Toulmin is: absurdity not only as the opposite of rationality but also as the significance of the world and life. You can take absurdity as the nonsensical and as inconsistency in terms of cognitive discourse, but you can also take it in terms of the lack of meaning in life—absurdity in the sense introduced by Nietzsche, for example: the death of god. And it's true that we are in such a situation: god is dead and the point is how is it possible to continue to build rational, consistent representation of the world, human beings, and life and death without the authorization of a god, of the witness of justice and truth. In this sense this is true, and some of us are impressed by this modern or postmodern break in Western thought—not really thought, history. But such absurdities are perfectly compatible with scientific rationality, and maybe they are closely tied together, because in a certain sense scientific rationality has to liberate from certain impossibilities the belief that the first mathematician is god and that it's impossible to have something other than the regular natural numbers in the arithmetic theory of numbers. The same with physics. At the end of the nineteenth century, some assumptions were proposed and finally more or less assumed, and they are transgressing the traditional notion of mathematics coming from Plato and even Descartes. That was the condition of rationality to break with finally. At first it can appear to be absurdity. So, we have to distinguish between absurdity and absurdity.

- Q. While your work has gained the admiration of many readers across the world, it has been criticized by some. Are there any criticisms or misunderstandings of your work that you'd care to address at this time?
- A. First, one misunderstanding is that some people take me to be a "theorist." I worked in several texts against this idea. I remember in the sixties when structuralist ideology was dominant in France and elsewhere I resisted this way of thinking. It was with a sort of pride (or arrogance) on my part to observe that finally a book like *Discours, figure*—which was completely ignored at the time because it was explicitly against structuralism, not only in terms of linguistic structuralism but even Lacanian structuralism because at that time the Lacanian reading of Freud was similar to Althusser on Marxism—has gained acceptance. I was against this way of thinking, and I am pleased that now readers have discovered this book. I was waiting thirty years—no problem. The point is that I'm not a theorist. Please, don't take the notion of postmodernity as theory. I never used the term *postmodernism*, only "the postmodern" or "postmodernity"—it's not an *ism*. The major misunderstanding is to transform into an *ism* what wasn't at all an *ism*. I hate *isms* because I'm not a theorist.

The second thing I have to say is that unavoidably and inevitably the way a work is introduced into an alien country is necessarily linked with certain mistakes, and I assume this. I have no protestation against this.

Finally, if I'm not comfortable, I have to stay in my country, and that's all. So there's a problem in the immigration of a way of thinking, and necessarily the reception is strange. For example, here in the United States I was received as the theoretician of postmodernity and as the postmodernist—oh, my god! For me *The Postmodern Condition* is the worst book I ever wrote, but it was the only one having a certain reception. I don't know why; I can't explain why. My wish is that those people who have the generosity to give some attention to my work would please read other things than this horrible book, because it was just a passage for me. But even so, I was obliged to come back to this question in a second book, *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, and I just published a third book called *Postmodern Moralities*. I'm obliged to do this in order to maintain or to find certain directions in the use of this word. So, I'm ready to be open to a discussion about this question, and I don't want to negate it. But, nevertheless, it's not my real question. I think that the questions you asked, particularly at the beginning of this interview, were closer to my concerns.

Winterowd Award Winners Announced

The annual W. Ross Winterowd Award for the most outstanding book on composition theory published in 1994 was awarded to Jasper Neel for *Aristotle's Voice: Rhetoric, Theory, and Writing in America*.

The 1993 W. Ross Winterowd Award was awarded to Kurt Spellmeyer for *Common Ground: Dialogue, Understanding, and the Teaching of Composition*. Honorable mention was shared by C.H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon for *Critical Teaching and the Idea of Literacy* and Valerie M. Balester for *Cultural Divide: A Study of African-American College-Level Writers*.

This annual award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd. The selection committee was chaired by Irene Ward. Professor Winterowd presented the 1994 awards during the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition meeting at the CCCC Convention in Washington DC.

Send nominations for the 1995 W. Ross Winterowd Award to Thomas Kent, editor; *Journal of Advanced Composition*; Department of English; Iowa State University; Ames, IA 50011.