Lyoness. Writing the event

Geoffrey Bennington
New York: Columbia University Press, 1988

Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event
by Jean-François Lyotard
New York: Columbia University Press, 1988

As a translator of major poststructuralist works into English, Geoffrey Bennington is perhaps best known for his joint translation (with Brian Massumi) of Lyotard’s The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, one might equally know Bennington from his partial translations of Lyotard and critical articles in such academic journals as Parnassus and The Oxford Literary Review, among others. As Bennington remarks in the opening lines of Lyotard, “Writing the event, ‘Lyotard is without question best known in the English-speaking world as the author of The Postmodern Condition.’” And is the word for it? Lyotard’s writings have been published by Columbia University Press in a variety of English-language translations, including the recent translation of Lyotard’s The Inhuman: Reflections on bowls (1974), Discourse, figures (1971), and Le Differend (1984), in that order. Clearly, we are not given a historical survey of Lyotard’s long career in politics and philosophy, nor does Bennington for a moment believe that he has presented Lyotard’s works without lacunae, even important ones.

The major virtue of Lyotard, Writing the event is that it takes us along the central but not well-trodden pathways of what Lyotard has called his “real” books in a way which is modest, careful, and at times meditative especially with respect to the section on Le Differend, and it does so with attention to Lyotard’s other writings, including the Report. Bennington, then, will undoubtedly find an appreciative audience in those who are poised to enter or have already entered and found themselves wandering unattended: the world of poststructuralism and the growth industry of Lyotard’s studies.

I have spent some time with the “introduction” for several reasons. It is one thing to be aware of the limits and problems of introductions in general, but another less straightforward matter to entertain the idea that the writing subjected to an introduction resists and possibly hides just that sort of attempt to domesticate it. While I have the slippery Liberalism Economy in mind here, the concern expressed also pertains to authors other than Lyotard.

The introduction is a sort of prosthetic device that helps the reader stand up before texts which are disabling and alienating: it is like a cane, an artificial limb and even an implant, depending upon the degree to which one relies on it to support...
one's understanding of a certain author. The introduction is at odds with a kind of writing which is tenuous, a writing which barely acknowledges that it has readers. For instance, with respect to Lé- baudé Escuyer, Lyotard remarks that even its rare readers disliked it, adding "thank God there were few."

The problem is not that such writing is incoherent, thus precluding any sort of synoptic approach. The question is whether or not an introduction can add- dress the matter of its cutting against the grain of the texts which its writing gathers and communicating itself so-called "textes," "conten- tions," etc. To ex- tend the text to be engage in a mimetic libidinal writing, an anti-theoretical, dis- cursive form of following along the mobile cathartic intensities as they have their run of a voluminous libidinal skin.

But what other choice does the author of an introduction have? One cannot rely on partial translations. After all, we should not complain too loudly, too quickly about the way in which Bennington un- solves and questions the centres of power of Libidinal Economy: the paradoxical (im- mobile and spinning bar of disjunction (the object)operandis the inde- scifable libidinal band, from which the bar is also derived; the libidinal band is neither an object of desire nor even an object, neither a lost relent like Jean Baudrillard's "symbolic exchange" nor an ontological ground.

While Bennington has us think of the bar of disjunction in terms of what separ- ates the inside from the outside or the subject from the object, we might also think of it in terms of the signifier/signi- fied relation. When Lyotard sends his bar on its way spinning and bursting like a mad hummingbird, it no longer dionsys- to, or in other words, everything flows together over the band which is nothing less than the flow of largely anonymous libidinal impulses. Lyotard is to some degree getting off a joke at the expense of Jacques Lacan with the spinning bar. A bar that doesn't maintain differences allows all of the algorithms which Lacan constructed out of the sign's bar of difference to col- lapse into an undifferentiated heap.

Bennington thinks that the libidinal band "is too ontological" and "irrevocably proclaimed as good, as law." Despite these criticisms, Bennington has a reclamation project in mid-six: save Libidinal Economy from its own scent. Thus, we read: "much of what is advanced in this book can be saved from itself. The base project of the book is the undoing of desisting and subverting the dis- positif (set-up), and that of seeking out the possibility of singularities and events, is repeated by Lyotard, and is in his view fundamental to the task of philoso- phy." Lyotard's "evil book" (his own ad- ministration) is saved by the even.

In the second essay of Préfigurations, "Touches," Lyotard calls "an event the face to face with nothingness." "Actual events, those kernels of nothingness, are often hidden behind everyday occurrences, were it not, Lyotard's "restauration" imagines "what they happen to be." Events are sin- gular occurrences, they just happen, as it were; that they happen is more basic than what has happened. Sensitivity and atten- tion to the event is likened to Paul Cézanne's reception of what he called the "emi- nent sensations" before Montagne Saint Victor and Immanuel Kant's reflective judgment, insomuch as one must respond to a case without recourse to a criterion un- der which the case may be subsumed: "in order to take on this attitude you have to impoverish your mind, clean it out as much as possible, so that you make it lo- calizable of anticipating the meaning..., the secret... lies in the power to be able to en- sure occurrences as 'directly' as possible." The recipe for this hybrid philosophical act is complicated: a little bit of pheno- nomenology, some lacan, a word from Freud about how to listen to the discourse of the patient, the brushstrokes of Mist Saint-Victoire... In treating the event as the "funda- mental drive in all Lyotard's work" and finding in Discourse, figure explicit confir- mation of that drive, Bennington describes the book as "something of a collection of events." Although Bennington admits that his approach to Discourse, figure is "re- volutionary," it is also a struggle for coherence against the figure which discor- nounces discourse with the Violence of an event, thereby telling any attempt to intro- duce it by keeping it at arm's length, one might keep an "object" of knowledge.

As Bennington follows along and explains some of the ways in which Lyotard decon- structs the opposition between discourse (reading, sense, signification, opposition) and figure (seeing, depth, deixis), it is made evident that discourse also im- habits and disrupts the space of the figure. For instance, Bennington's detailed treat- ment of "Le travail du rêve ne pas garse" (The dream-work does not think, an essay in Discourse, figure which quotes Freud's description of the final process of the dream-work, secondary reaction, in The Interpretation of Dreams, brings out well what is at stake in the "originally complicat- ed discours and figure." Lyotard's assault on Lacan's reading of the unconscious on the model of language points to the instance of discourse in figure and vice versa in Freud that Lacan could not see because of his desire to find the operations of language in the dream-work. Lacan, then, overlooked the elementary imper of figureability. For all of the trouble that Discourse, figure caused him, Bennington's deployment of it exhibits a healthy tension between the habit of an academic orthodoxy and the need to consider oneself in order to es- timate as receive the events which are the text. Might we take Préfigurations to be an introduction to an introduction in the exact false guise of the word although it is advertised as an "ideal introduction," which is to say that it is the record of three short oral addresses given as The Wellesly Lectures at the University of California, Irvine, and a translation of the essay from 1982, "Pour Seyou: Le Malvecine qu'a pas finir." Lyotard's Wellesly Lectures—"Clouds," "Touches," and "Gaps"—are anamnesis of his work which concern the passage of thoughts (clouds) which are not our own as well as our attempts to enter into them as we prescient with them: "Imagine the sky as a desert full of immaterial cumu- lous clouds slipping by and metamorphos- ing themselves, and into whose flood your thinking can (or rather must) fall and make contact with this or that unexpected as- pert. To touch is to make "touch-ting" con- tected with what a cloud of thought brings forth and in the flash of that accidence develop one's own signature, as Césaire before the Montagne Saint-Victoire. The gap between two phrases or sentences in the condition, says Lyotard, of the appearance of different engines (actuative, prescrip- tives, etc.) are linked together by different genres (philosophy, science, etc.). The addresses in Préfigurations are highly metaphorical and personal and as such stand in stark contrast to Lyotard. Writing the event. The essay concerning Lyotard's Différend with Pierre Soury, how- ever, while intensely personal and reflec- ting the coherence against the figure which discor- nounces discourse with the Violence of an event, thereby telling any attempt to intro- duce it by keeping it at arm's length, one might keep an "object" of knowledge.

In Le Différend, although in that later work it is presented in an analytical manner perfused with quasi-legal ter- minology. In Le Différend, Lyotard explains that as opposed to a litigious, a differential would be a case of conflict between two parties (at least) which could not equally be decided for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both argumentations. Imagine- that a stretch of wilderness is being defended by an ecologist against a developer. The plaintiff, presenting the case for preservation, appears before a panel of scientists, lawyers, civil servants, etc. During the presentation of the case it becomes clear that the "plaintiff cannot provide the sure of evidence which the panels wish to hear. Why is this the case? The argument for preservation is based on regard for natural beauty, the wonder of non-human being, and the injurious effects of having non- human beings which one identifies with (to the point of reconfiguring it into a concept of self-reared by the bulldozer of the developer. The panels ask for hard data: evidence of the negative impact of development on certain habitats, the costs of such development, etc. The plaintiff cannot give herself over to the language of the humanities, that language which does not express the very terms of reference which one wishes to overcome; yet, it not adopting that language, one does not express the case as mere poetry, mysticism or worse. The plaintiff has no way to state the case and suffer a wrong which, as Lyotard defines it, is "a damage acknowledged by the loss of the means to prove the damage." And there is more. The victim of the differential attempts to explain to the panel that she has been wronged. The panel replies, yes, such has happened. It is precisely the way you bear witness to it before us or, no such thing has occurred, you have no evi- dence, or false evidence.

Like our ecologist, whose the differential and the drinker Seyou over a provide a revolutionary con- tinuation in that world for a common- sense universe (over the four poles of self- centred and meaning) it's impossible to make it up. Given this, it is clear that Le Différend revealed to Fe- marie is not a case of one isolate con- uses which seeks to others. That "conflict- tracy" and it is not even about it because "one is". But even this difference demonstrates out of such that seize- ment which can be transmitted. It is the politics and politics to begin the main lines of Le Différend yield easily readable "summary" ing themselves as a series of "sentences," although attention to them in depths of Le Différend which is roving at its does not make the philosopher from little texts to modern rituals, Bennington compiles abundant quotations between the authors (other authors) marked by a sense of the sense. What is most interesting is the common threads (primarily from Lyotard chapters as texts) by which Le Différend begins, as Bernard "Fiche de Lecture" allows the reader to read the "book", if the fantasy having read it... "A book as an act of commercial ritual of "Mellin" which gains one time and at certain moments, as Lyotard has been reading the book. Even this review, "Le Différend" becomes a part of a certain meat in a chat book, in which case the previous chapter is also relevant. The very fact nothingness, despite his va- vates the quantity of the intellectual and the that discomfort is it
Science and Intellectual Colonialism. New Directions, is the most recent edition of a volume published for the first time in 1970, and again in 1973, both times with several printings. The book is a collection of essays written by Orlando Fals Borda, a Colombian historical sociologist who has had an intense, long-term involvement with campaigns in rural areas of his own country, and whose work is known internationally.

In this volume, the author presents reflections on his earlier work, as well as his current views on sociological issues that, although pertaining primarily to social research in Latin America, also constitute a challenge for social scientists elsewhere. Where the book first appeared, it was received as a radical rejection of Euro-American social thought by the Latin American community of scholars. In this light, it is interesting to note that the work has not been translated into other languages, nor (to the best of my knowledge) has it been published elsewhere. The title translation is my own, and might perhaps be more faithful to the original if it read "Independent" or "autonomous" science and intellectual colonialism.

Fals Borda's prestige has grown throughout Latin America for his original contribution to a new perspective in sociology, which can be paralleled to that of Anthony Giddens (New Rules of Sociological Method), while arising in very different sociopolitical contexts, an important fact indeed. Fals Borda's thought was born in the midst of various developmentalist schools that have dominated Latin American sociological inquiry. This fact underscores his importance as theorist and practitioner on the continent, and has recently earned him further recognition in the position of President of the Latin American Council for Adult Education (CEAL).

While some researchers might claim that Fals Borda is on the "boundaries" of social science, others obviously recognize his place in the leadership of an alternative sociology of/for Latin America. This is one of the reasons why this selection of his work seems so appropriate as an introduction to his thinking. Indeed, it would provide excellent translation material.

The essays are organized into three parts. The first, "Crisis and Compromise," consists of six works dating from 1969 to 1970. This section refers to two important historical events within which the role of science and technology in development was called to question. These were, initially, the IX International Congress of rural sociology in Enschede, followed by the IX Congress of Latin American Sociology held in Mexico City in 1969. In these encounters a diagnosis was made of the sociological crisis in the region and the need for new approaches to the social sciences clearly identified. This process of reflection gave rise to the initial challenge to the collective "sociological imagination" of researchers, to find new, innovative solutions to longstanding, pervasive sociological problems.

The second part of the book, "Reflections of Transition," consists of two essays dated 1972 and 1974, in which the author looks back to the first publication of his work and reflects upon the changes that have already become apparent within the human sciences, over the ten years since the first edition appeared. One of these changes is the possibility of questioning both "objectivity" and "neutrality" on the part of social researchers in general and the etic perspective of the political value of social research. Starting from this rather liberating stance, Fals Borda urges fellow social scientists to move in the direction of a unification or synthesis of research and theory. That is to say, given the recognition of the political dimension of research activities, it is now possible for research agents to consciously steer their work towards serving the broadest of interests.

The third part, "Lived Experience and Knowledge," is composed of five essays, written from 1980 to 1987. They constitute a reflection about the meaning and the position of knowledge within society, with an emphasis on the production of knowledge and the relationship between knowledge and power. In foreshadowing the current fashion, politics and epistemology are brought together to explore the birth of participatory action research, a new integrative method proposed by this author, amidst the renewed awakening of social movements throughout the world. The connection between the production of knowledge and its uses seems more clearly identified within these essays. As indicated above, the work examines the development of the author's...