

_____ : SILENCE,
THE AFFECT PHRASE, THE WAIT.

By Josh Schwebel

Nothing is; and even if it is, it is unknowable; and even if it is and it is knowable, it cannot be revealed to others. - Gorgias

The relation between experience, language and reality is not immediate or equivalent. While often conflated to demand a commensurate exchange, language is an unstable medium that can be full or empty of ‘truth’. When people have differing accounts of what may seem to be the same reality, the variability of language becomes more apparent. An event may take place before a group of witnesses and each retelling may be different. Indeed, depending on its nature, an event may have caused a trauma to the extent that the experience may never achieve adequate representation in language. Each witness may struggle to recall an experience that exceeds the capacity of conscious perception. The only testimony of such an experience may be silence or inarticulate sound that communicates more than meaning and less than sense. Does this entail that nothing happened? An absence of speech could mean that there is nothing to say or that nothing *can* be said – silence is indistinguishably non-language and an allusion to the limits of

language. Jean-Francois Lyotard's The Differend: Phrases in Dispute pursues the limits of language. Herein Lyotard asks, "How can you establish what is not without criticizing what is? The undetermined cannot be established" (Lyotard, 9). This paper will examine the potential of silence to depose the subject through Lyotard's concepts of the differend, the affect-phrase, the event and reality.

This paper will not be the type of investigation that attempts to create an ontology of silence. I am not trying to inscribe silence into an 'is'. Silence is not a thing in itself. While one cannot point to a thing and say 'That is silence', one *can* point and say 'That is silent.' However, many of the 'objects' on whose behalf we speak, some of whom or which have the capacity to express their own pain and fear, are determined or commanded to be silent. While the ambiguity of a particular silence may give it an optimistic edge of familiarity, each silence also carries with it the interminable possibility that it may engulf all sensible language. The silence with which I am concerned is that immense, echoing void of meaning which trembles behind the assertion 'there is'. In this pursuit, the following paper will investigate the relation between silence and language, and between language and the subject.

Western philosophy is a tradition of thought that has constructed an account of reality by establishing and examining 'what is.' This tradition has sought to determine the character of 'beings' in their 'essence' by categorizing, representing and appropriating experiences of perception into distinct, known beings. These beings are identified and bounded in space and time as finite and present objects of knowledge, capable of being recalled and exchanged through their representation in language. Indeed, for the most part, the distinction between a thing and its

name goes unnoticed. However, this amalgamation occurs through the 'is' in language, which renders things comparable, identifiable and present. This ontological structure that binds a thing to its identity simultaneously establishes difference. A thing can only be itself as different from other things. A is B only insofar as A is not C. As the absence that surrounds and presupposes language, silence inserts itself into the spaces between A and B, bringing the 'is' back to the foreground and throwing language outside itself. The breach given in silence may throw us temporarily outside the use of language, to consider the world of the 'is' itself.

As subjects in the metaphysical model of relation, we are accustomed to experiencing our lives through a certainty that comes from knowledge, which guarantees that the majority of our experiences will correspond to events or objects already encountered. We already know how to respond to most situations since, according to the mode of knowledge alluded to above, we recognize, identify and categorize situations as similar or identical to previous experiences that have been constituted by relationships with known objects. This is how experience is articulated – through the combination of known objects in language. In the moments when this certainty is shifted, interrupted in some way, things become otherwise – words resound as meaningless sounds in our ears, as if heard for the first time. These strange slips of time allow us to ask ourselves, 'Is this happening?' and to let the measured ground of reality drift aside ever so slightly. Lyotard describes this shift when he suggests thinking of "silence as a phrase. The expectant wait of the *Is it happening?* as silence. Feelings as a phrase for what cannot now be phrased" (Lyotard, 70). The 'Is it happening?' is a moment privileged by Lyotard as he discusses the incommensurate relationship between experience, communication and language. His concept of the differend refers to the incommunicable excess lost in the translation from one person's

experience to another's acceptance of this testimony as reality. The differend refers to the tension resulting from the disparity between what can and cannot be communicated in language – pointing to the future as what cannot *yet* be phrased.

In order to consider the significance of the silent phrase, it is necessary to outline Lyotard's theory of the organization of communication. Lyotard proposes thinking of communication as an ongoing series of phrases, organized along two axes with four poles. Each phrase is communicated from an addressor to an addressee, and each phrase communicates a meaning that relates to a referent. A phrase is situated across these four poles within a phrase-universe. A word *apple* refers to a thing, apple. In operation, the meaning apple-thing is referred to by the word *apple*. Thus, I address my friend to communicate certain experiences with said referent, the *apple*. The phrase following mine links onto its predecessor in a variety of related or unrelated ways. Through the possible links that are meaningful or meaningless, a phrase universe is constructed. Silence, also a phrase, is not incorporated into a phrase universe until the phrase that follows it. This means that until the silence is broached by a response, its character is inassimilable. It remains open until a subsequent phrase renders it articulated or unintelligible. In itself, silence is never articulate, but as no phrase occurs by itself, there is always the enveloping of a phrase in silence, and the enveloping of silence within a phrase universe.

A differend arises out of the impediment to one of the four poles of articulation. Each of these can be impeded or disarticulated, rendering four possible silences in Lyotard's system of phrasing. These suggest the occurrence of a differend. On the addressor-addressee pole, a

differend occurs either because the addressor is incapable of voicing an experience, or because the addressee fails to hear—either failing to listen to, or comprehend—what the addressor is saying. Alternately, on the meaning-referent pole, there is the possibility that there simply are not words available for what needs to be phrased or the referent itself may be hidden, secret or unknowable. More than a simple misunderstanding that can be resolved through litigation or further clarification, a differend signals the breakdown of communication. The differend exists due to the impossibility of maintaining and transferring identity, presence or truth from one person to another. Differends occur on a small scale each time I attempt to render my experiences in language, since language can never correspond exactly to what it refers to and always omits certain excesses¹.

According to Lyotard, reality is constructed out of the agreement of phrases between addressor-addressee and meaning-referent in a perpetual linking of phrases. Contrary to what one would assume, Lyotard suggests that “reality is not what is ‘given’ to this or that ‘subject’” (Lyotard, 4). In other words, if I should attempt to tell an acquaintance about a certain experience I have had, I must first speak of this experience (this experience must be of the sort that I can articulate), my friend must be able to hear and understand what I am saying, and we must negotiate a set of terms with common referents. Through this process the experience will be more or less transferred from myself to my friend.

¹ For instance, while the example I am using is a simple apple, in the text by Lyotard, the referent discussed is the existence of the gas chambers during the Holocaust – for which the proof has severe consequences for those who attempt to communicate their experiences in the face of those who deny the reality of the referent being addressed.

Lyotard's model proposes the following: "to establish the reality of a referent, the four silences must be refuted, though in reverse order: there is someone to signify the referent and someone to understand the phrase that signifies it; the referent can be signified, it exists" (Lyotard, 16). Communication operates in this manner regardless of the actuality of any experience I have undergone. Once I convince my friend that my experience has occurred, it will be accepted as reality. Or, in the case of the differend, the reverse occurs – the experience cannot be accepted as reality because it cannot be communicated.

There is also a political dynamic inherent in the occurrence and perpetuation of the differend since what remains to be said is often what ethically *ought* to be said. The repercussions of the differend are political. Reality, as constructed by phrase-universes, relies on and upholds a dominant genre maintained via the exchange of information through language. This analogy is clearly posited by Lyotard when he writes, "communication is the exchange of messages, exchange the communication of goods. The instances of communication like those of exchange are definable only in terms of property or propriety" (Lyotard, 12). He takes this comparison further, writing, "in the economic genre, the rule is that what happens can happen only if it has already been paid back, and therefore has already happened. Exchange presupposes that the cession is cancelled in advance by a counter-cession" (Lyotard, xvi). According to this economic model the dominant discourse anticipates and retains all accounts of what has happened and what will happen. In its wish to avoid the 'Is it happening?' the dominant economy of discourse allows nothing to happen. This means that reality, as it is constructed by phrases accepted to be commensurate with the sense they impart, is governed by an adherence to stasis. This nothing of stasis is a complementary nothing that, by repressing change, produces the

static electricity of the differend. The silence of the differend is a potential energy that electrifies and charges the phrasing of reality. And reality denies the charge of the differend as it repeats its own established genre in a closed circuit.

Following the analogy between communication and property, a differend occurs as a debt on one side and an excess on the other. Wrongs as differends occur because the dominant genre of articulation “holds the monopoly on the procedures for the establishment of reality” (Lyotard, 4). The dominant genre of articulation cannot recognize the wrongs it commits since they occur outside cognizable discourse. Since the social debts accumulated by the majority of one type of reality dominating another are differends that cannot be articulated in the language of power, they remain unacknowledged and unrecognized.

Lyotard’s distinction between phrases and reality merits further consideration. First of all, ‘something *is*’ not because it happened, but because it can be proved – phrased – as having happened. The presentation of reality through phrasing is not simultaneous or identical to the event. The presentation of reality is always only a particular situation of an event – a positioning or locating of an event. The event is continuously passing, continuously lost and continuously the bearer of differends as it is presented – articulated – as reality. Presentation in phrasing is transcendental *to*, rather than empirically *of* the event. The event presented in language is always other than itself. Lyotard suggests this interpretation when he writes, “the ‘present’ presentation is not able to be phrased now; it is only able to be phrased as a situation (before/after) in the universe presented by another phrase: it is then the former presentation” (Lyotard, 74).

This perspective allows us to recognize the parallel, non-full status of language and to see it as a *situation* of an event. Each successive linking of phrases modifies the former presentation. As such, silence initiates an ambiguous stall in the concatenation of phrases. Since it is a form of phrasing but is always other than language, always inarticulate, silence disrupts the representation of reality. In its ambiguity, silence disrupts representation precisely because it cannot be distinguished or identified. Silence can indicate the occurrence of a differend; however, it is entirely ambiguous as to *what* is absent. The testimony given in silence is improbable, indeterminate – always unrecognizable to language. Lyotard writes, “silence does not indicate which instance is denied, it signals the denial of one or more instances” (Lyotard, 14). Silence in language is both language and event – as it both occupies and interrupts the continuous flow of presentations to reveal a space of absence beyond being.

Beyond the four types of silence indicative of a differend *within* language, another pre-ontological silence brackets the occurrence of language, which Lyotard proposes when he suggests “another kind of silence. One that does not bear upon an instance in a phrase universe, but which bears upon the occurrence of a phrase” (Lyotard, 75). The ambiguity of silence means that in each encounter with a silence any or all of these disruptions are suggested.

The occurrence, the phrase, as a *what* that happens, does not stem from the question of time, but from that of Being/non-Being. This question is called forth by a feeling: it is possible for nothing to happen. Silence not as a phrase in abeyance, but as a nonphrase, a

non *what*. This feeling is anxiety or surprise: there is something rather than nothing.

(Lyotard, 75)

Lyotard continues this exploration of silence in The Inarticulate Affect-Phrase, a subsequent text to The Differend, in which he reformulates silence as affect-phrase. The affect-phrase is, according to Lyotard, a feeling for which “one cannot find the words” (Lyotard, 2006, 104). It is an expression of an intensity of feeling signaled as a cry, a silence, or even a gesture. The affect-phrase is the mute sounding or silence that breaks out in the experience of pain or extreme pleasure. Lyotard describes the affect-phrase as, “at once an affective state (pleasure or pain) and the sign of this state” (Lyotard, 2006, 105). Distinct from other phrases, the referent and meaning of this phrase are simultaneous and the same. “The feeling cannot be identified with itself. It can only be experienced, as we say: it signals itself” (Lyotard, 2006, 106). This means that the affect-phrase disrupts both ordered experience of temporality and the ordering of experience through articulation. According to Lyotard, the affect-phrase “does not present a phrase universe” (Lyotard, 2006, 105). This is because the meaning it signifies – a feeling either of pleasure or of pain – is not a referent, since it cannot be presented in language. Pain or pleasure are singular experiences that correspond to no object and exist only as transitory experiences that a witness cannot verify. Further, the feeling signaled by the affect-phrase, “does not proceed from any addressor (I) and does not address itself to any addressee (you)” (Lyotard, 2006, 105). Qualified as ‘inarticulate,’ the affect-phrase holds an entirely different status than the representational relation between language and event.

Lyotard is drawing on Freud's theories of the structure of the psyche in his development of the affect-phrase. In Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud considers the behaviours and processes that occur beyond conscious intent, and determines these to be symptoms of experiences that cannot be articulated. Throughout his text, Freud examines the ego's relationship with traumatic experiences that break through the ego's control over its environment. He concludes that consciousness evolved to protect the psyche from the harsh experiences of the world. Conscious perception acts as a damper that lets in only the most muted of stimuli (excitation), and is therefore prepared to balance out a general range of excitation. However, certain excitation exceeds its reserve capacity for absorption, and punctures the psyche's protective shell of consciousness. This excess, perhaps traumatic, cannot be accounted for in the balanced exchange of conscious representation of experience. Retained as imperceptible, the psychic wound is returned to in dreams, surfacing through symptoms wholly beyond conscious propriety and the attempts of consciousness to maintain stasis.

In applying the distinction between consciousness, unconsciousness and psyche, Freud distinguishes representation from experience. Consciousness is an authoring, a representation and articulation of experience as subject. The subject of consciousness casts itself as the author of its perceptions, but the psyche and unconscious experience exceeds what the conscious subject can know. The psyche retains these remainders that cannot be made conscious. Occasionally an unrelated occurrence will call forth a previously repressed experience, causing the memory of something of which the subject was previously unaware of experiencing to surface. In other words, there are experiences to which we have (not) been exposed. These are retained without

any subsequent knowledge, since the experience either occurred prior to our being conscious of it, as in the case of the infant who has yet to organize itself as subject, or caused a trauma – in which case the experience exceeds the capacity of what the consciousness can endure. These experiences occupy our unconscious as silences or gaps that remain unavailable to representation and consciousness. Claire Nouvet, writing on Lyotard's affect-phrase, describes this anomaly beautifully when she writes:

There can be feelings that 'I' do not feel, experience or live, at least consciously, feelings that exceed the feeling ability of the conscious subject, and that can therefore only be experienced in the absences of this subject. In that sense, the affect is not a 'lived experience,' since it entails a kind of death of the 'mind' that claims to be the only subject of experience. It provokes its eclipse and inscribes itself, unnoticed, in its absences to itself. The affect: a feeling felt by no 'I' and no 'one.'

(Nouvet, 109)

The affect-phrase suggests forgotten experiences that seem to have occurred but cannot be recalled to memory, words that disappear in mid-sentence or those that lose their meaning in their sounding, physical symptoms that respond to unknowable causes. These silences haunt the attempts of the subject to make sense of its experiences.

To say, as Lyotard does, that the affect-phrase does not proceed from any addressor indicates that in the affect-phrase there is no subject. Subjective comprehension occurs in

succession, overcoming, re-presenting and organizing what *occurred*. An affect-phrase cries out from the moment of its experience. The time of the affect-phrase is its event: “It awaits nothing,” (Lyotard, 2006, 107). Reality *takes place*, literally filling in the space and time between the event and its phrasing– the ‘now’ that is applied onto and after the passage of a moment but can never achieve the simultaneity to which it refers. In a political sense, as reality *takes place* it wrongs the event; that is, in the dominant articulation of an event, other genres of articulation are silenced and repressed.

The affect-phrase is inarticulate because it has not been subjected to the regime of the conscious subject. Lyotard indicates precisely this when he writes, “the feeling cannot be identified with itself by itself. It can only be experienced” (Lyotard, 2006, 106). The subject is not phrasing the affect, *it* is phrasing. Is this the *it* of the *there is*? The *it* that precedes and exceeds representation? As Lyotard writes, “the *There is* takes place, it is an occurrence (*Ereignis*), but it does not present anything to anyone, it does not present itself, and it is not the present, nor is it presence” (Lyotard, 75). The affect-phrase, in its temporal simultaneity and a-subjective² response is beyond the comparative diachrony that measures and structures meaning. Affect deposes the subject, suspending consciousness and representation in a prior and overwhelming responsiveness.

The ambiguity of silence means that not every pause is the silence of affect – rather silence is a suspension of determination, neither the articulation of a representation nor the inarticulacy of the differend. In the suspension of silence, what is happening is unclear. Until the phrase that succeeds it, silence resounds as an opening that could obliterate the sense of

² One could say abject, but that would be beyond the scope of this exploration.

language. Attending every phrasing, silence recalls the potential of the subject to be absent, the potential of experience to be greater than its memory or representation. Silence signals the forgotten memory of affect, inaccessible to consciousness as it hunts down the correct word to aid in capturing an event. Silence beckons towards the differends that hover outside every assertion of being... towards the incredulity and discovery of “Is it happening?”

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