



## Lyotard in Passing

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ROBERT HARVEY

Today, after what some had been whispering was an inordinately long time without a new book, Jean-François Lyotard has left us with three late works of consequence, in quick succession. A posthumous essay on Saint Augustine is forthcoming. *Chambre sourde*, an exquisite and spare disquisition on aesthetics in the wake of André Malraux, appeared earlier this year in France. And both of these are bright bursts out of the crucible that is *Signé Malraux* (Grasset, 1996). Defined by inextricable ties that mingle voice, confession, and story, vectors of speculation pointing toward the style of Lyotard's two final books are immediately recognizable in the chapter from *Signed, Malraux* (forthcoming from the University of Minnesota Press) that the editors of *October* magazine are pre-publishing here.

It was Lyotard's express wish that, in its translated avatars, *Signé Malraux* remain as it is in the original Grasset edition: unfettered, that is, by any matter that might be construed as explanatory in any way. "I think that the book doesn't need any preface—or else one by Hemingway," he wrote me from Paris on March 1, 1997, "and especially not for explaining—excusing ourselves to academics for a 'philosopher' who took interest in a writer. As for an afterword, you'd have to tell me more." A little further in that letter he added, "Eleven months to translate this: the agreed deadline terrifies me." Then, postscriptum and, to my mind, irrevocably: "On further thought my desire is that the book be produced as is, without *crutches*." In a response I sent on March 11 from Stony Brook, I wrote, "Of course, any afterword would have required your approval. I was really only thinking about *la Redite*: its capital role in the book and the difficulty in translating it precisely.

So in writing these remarks to accompany "Coups de femme"—this foretaste of *Signed, Malraux* that I have the opportunity of placing outside the book to come—I am only partially in accord with Lyotard's expressed wishes. In allowing me to air a few thoughts associated with translating a book of which Lyotard was as proudly protective as he was with *Discours, figure* and *Le Différend*, this venue is distant enough from that book so as to leave it without "crutches." It nevertheless comments. It comments not so much *on* the book as it does *around* it. I must and will eschew explanation and excuse for *Signed, Malraux*. Rather, and in addition to

getting some words out there (as had been my original intention) concerning the phrase I chose to render *la Redite*, I will try to characterize the unique reading experience that translation is when dialogue with the author is actually possible and anticipate what that experience will be like now that the possibility of dialogue is foreclosed by Lyotard's passing. Between those two states of experience for the affectively engaged reader, there lies an inevitable but perhaps not altogether impassible gulf.

The lavish yet typically Lyotardian paratactic style that *Signed, Malraux* exhibits, the interwoven strands of its poetic language, the movable feast of lexicons deployed to lend contours of authenticity to distinct epochs, the intricate thematic tapestry, the insistence on keeping distinct the "who?" questions that hover around "André" from the "what?" associated with "Malraux"—all features and idiosyncracies of *Signed, Malraux* will remain for the reader herself to discover. Nor will I attempt to anticipate answers to such questions as What is a "hypobiography"? (Hypobiography is the neogenre into which Lyotard deposited the book.) Why this spectacularly narrative manifestation from a philosopher known for his critique of narrative (especially the grand ones)? And why narrative now? Why indeed might a "philosopher" be interested in a "writer"? Why did Lyotard, when referring to himself as a philosopher, set off the term with scare quotes? What of his own life did Lyotard perceive in his perception of "André's"? And so forth. These will be for Lyotard's readers to examine and the multiplicity of readings the book will inspire to explore. Rather, if a translator has anything beyond the translation to do, it is to evoke observations consequential of the very peculiar form of close reading that the translation process entails. If, in addition, the translator was fortunate enough to have been linked to the author by friendship, the evocation of that reading may be permitted the shading lent to it by the pathos of passing.

About the time Jean-François was well enough to go outdoors following his first treatments for cancer, we went over to Omar's restaurant for couscous and some Tlemcen red, and to finalize the plans for me to translate the book. While anxious to see it published in English as soon as possible, Lyotard understood my need to make good on some shorter publishing commitments. I assured him, however, that I could have it done by early 1998. That prospect cheered him. A few months later, following a somewhat slapstick confusion to which neither of us was at first privy, the contractual green light shone.

But when I arrived in Paris in late May 1997, I was only able to report that I had drafted about thirty pages (of 350 in the French). Obviously, I had hoped to be further along. Breaking my ankle while slipping off a wet granite curb a week later, however, hitched me to my task. Stuck in my cast, I learned that Jean-François and his wife and son, Dolorès and David, were readying to leave for what the former was calling with relish a "real" vacation. So, while I healed in Lozère and made great headway on the translation, the Lyotards rested in Alpes-Maritimes.

As sick as it turned out he was, Lyotard remained intensely engaged throughout the process of translating *Signé Malraux*. In a manner to which I'd become

accustomed through years of epistolary discussions, he was quick to return my lists of queries that he'd glossed meticulously in his tiny, penciled notations. The reading that is a translator's easily turns up the full spectrum of errors that may riddle first editions. This translator's reading was not an exception. In bringing Lyotard's French into idiomatic English, I consulted his opinion whenever I felt ambiguity could not be lifted. Although he opined in most cases, it was reassuring for me to know he was happy with this or that decision. It is now painfully obvious to me how precious those moments and phrases of exchange, negotiation, debate were and will be to me.

The single term for which it was hardest to find a good equivalent—a proxy faithful enough to stand by me, as it were, through each of its occurrences in the original—was *la Redite*. To pen an incisive allegory for Malraux's feeling of the recurrence of death in his personal experience of life, Lyotard had refracted Nietzschean Return toward repetition in language. This was a repetition specific to voiced language: *re-dite*, from the past participle of *dire* (to say), that which is said again. *Redite* connotes not only some word, some phrase, a thought that is rerun or reiterated, but also palpable uselessness or superfluity in reiteration. In writing classes, students are warned (among all the other warnings) to avoid *redites*. And death, ancient and voracious, death, that master at performatives, deals its fatal blows in uttered swaths rather than by strokes of the proverbial scythe. Death, in Lyotard's view, spoke with relentless, redundant, haunting regularity from within Malraux's body. Hence my choice of the "Redundant One" for his *Redite*, for the periodic coursing of death through Malraux's life.

Yet another force appeared to Malraux, which he believed might, on rare occasions, come to hold forth there, deep inside, to resist and ward off the Redundant One. Each of us, sooner or later, makes the startling discovery that the only voice "I" hear with "my" throat is my own. I learn this when I hear my voice with my *ears* for the first time. This audition of my voice from without—an audition mediated by magnetic recording—is uncanny in its alienating effect. Extrapolating on this banal experiential observation, Malraux came to believe that fundamental human separateness could—in love or in war—be momentarily overcome as your voice comes to join my "inner voice" to speak through my throat. In unison: a union that nevertheless cannot endure. (Similarly—desperately, because it is unattainable—the translator's ultimate ideal is to espouse the "inner voice" of the author.) This Malraucian intuition, pondered with insistence in the "Coups de femme" chapter, raises unmistakable resonance with Lyotard's key, often misunderstood theory of the *différend*. In this chapter, Lyotard will go so far as to call sexual difference, what he sees as "the latent and persistent motif in Malraux's life and work . . . the sexual *différend*." Perhaps this slippage is due only the indirect discourse that indeed permeates the "hypobiography." Perhaps not.

Echos of the *différend* will be made out elsewhere as well. And this is where a third element I would like to discuss arises. This third element is scattered across the semantic tapestry of the entire book. Between the opposing forces of the

Redundant One and the fleeting resistance of communion through the inner voice there lies a passage. And, as I hinted earlier, it is one thing to translate when the version can be negotiated with the author; quite another task is to read (and perhaps translate) subsequent to the author's passing. I would like to suggest (and just suggest) that this difference—the difference between two states of the relation to the other and to otherness—is somehow *different* in the case of Lyotard. It is certain that Lyotard's marked fascination for *Lazarus*, Malraux's final work, will not go unnoticed to the reader of *Signed, Malraux*: Lazarus, the man who, according to Malraux's formulation, discovers an "I without a self" that resists the fatal passage; Lyotard, who in these last couple of years considered himself a "man with a reprieve." His *Signed, Malraux*, in any case, relentlessly foregrounds an intersection between two states. The book operates at the threshold and convinces us by its own conviction that the threshold is an operative state. It is as if, in passing, Lyotard had left translator(s) instructions as to what to do when all was said and done.

Two words—*la passe* and *le passage*, around which a great explicit and implicit lexical constellation gravitates—inform the prose of *Signed, Malraux*. Isolated from the myriad phrases and expressions that French can build on them, some of their definitions are equivalent or roughly so. Yet how apparently dissimilar are a prostitute's trick (*une passe*) and the wave of a magician's hand or a code word (*passe* as well)? To express some types of transformation (and, lest we've forgotten, metamorphosis is a key notion with Malraux), both *passe* and *passage* are available, sometimes interchangeably, to the French speaker. Yet how different are the connotations fomented between the statements "X made the pass to Y" and "X made a pass at Y."

On the first page of *Signed, Malraux*, Lyotard imagines a very young André already acquiring a sense for what a mature Malraux, inspired by Asian philosophy, will call the "passing-of-things." The reader-translator cannot but recall the importance lent to the notion of passage in *Le Différend*—a preeminence that ranges from Wittgenstein's *Übergang* to the failure of passage in history. Working his idea, Lyotard boldly asserts that this "passing that does not pass" (*un passage qui ne passe pas*) is the only attitude that can enable one both to withstand the spectacle of the Redundant One and to escape History for salutary moments. But to hold to the tenuous threshold attitude is perilous. There are tentative, tempting, but ultimately unsatisfactory solutions to the perils that menace the living and the obsessions that haunt them—solutions whose descriptions test the limits of translation:

Abjection is tempting, after all. Maybe as good a system as wanting to sign is to become no more than an object of passing fancy [*à passades*], a body for tricks [*de passe*], indifferent to signatures, to allow oneself to be signed just any old way by anybody or anything.... A kind of suicide? No doubt. But survival as well.

Variations on *pas* and *passage* and their complex usages permeate chapters in which the women crucial to Malraux's life are most prominent. These women are Berthe, his mother, ever associated with the series of deaths he witnessed as a youth; Clara, his wife, the mother of Florence, the unsurpassable chief critic; and Josette Clotis, crushed by a train just before the Liberation, the mother of Gauthier and Vincent, themselves both killed in a car crash. In these contexts and given that both *pas* and *passage* may evoke the Hebrews' flight from Egypt, Malraux imperceptibly (that is, through style, not argumentation) acquires the image of a tribal chief—a patriarch who, instead of ever reaching some promised land, remains in the eye of the pass. To render the complexity of Clara, Lyotard bends accepted usage, forcing us to accept contorted and undecidable meanings. We straightforwardly understand *forcer le passage* ("to break through" some obstacle) to describe and dramatize the ultimate wish for the Indochinese people in Clara's body-and-soul commitment to the anticolonial struggle. But when Lyotard writes of Clara: "Elle a quatre langues qui parlent dans sa bouche, traductrice, transitaire. Allemande en France, Française en Allemagne, juive nulle part, femme partout. Non pas de passage mais acharnée à forcer la passe," we simply must, before translating, pause and meditate the multiple connections being made. This woman ferociously bent on fighting for life wherever she is, this woman whose sexuality both subjugated and surpassed Malraux, she who would never submit to any manhandling and yet who never hesitated to force the hand of he who might hold her harbors the secret of the "passing that does not pass." Struggle is endless; struggle is visceral; struggle is impervious to discourse. "Translator and transit agent, four languages speak in her mouth. A German woman in France, a Frenchwoman in Germany, nowhere a Jewess, woman everywhere. Not for a fling, but one who is bent on forcing the way through."

The final page of *Signed, Malraux* features Lyotard's musings about cats and their symbolism in relation to death—Malraux's death, of course. Animals that stop to sniff at thresholds both visible and invisible, cats would appear to be embodied proof that something like what Malraux called the "present beyond" may exist in the here and now. Between going on with and going on without, between these states conjoined at an impassible passage, there is a difference in Lyotard. That difference is, among other things, that which makes *Signed, Malraux* anything but a biography. "The ego plays out its biography on the stage of the world," you are about to read, "but inside, beneath the boards, an 'I' persists, remaining with bestial tenacity. Affirming what? Nothing: just that there is . . . that there is a remainder." This, to me, is what Lyotard has tried to get at through a great poetic deployment in passing.