

The Event of Sense in Lyotard's *Discours, figure*

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One of the dominant themes structuring the trajectory of Jean-François Lyotard's philosophical work is his concern to think the event in a way that renders it intelligible, but that also respects the alterity and the uncanniness that are essential to it.¹ Throughout his work, the event names an experience of heterogeneity, of a "something" that we find ourselves unable adequately to signify. It is manifest as the difference between the meaning of what has happened and the bare fact that it has happened, and thus as a disruption of our established understandings of the world. It is "always that which defies knowledge; it can defy knowledge articulated in discourse, but it can just as well shake the quasi-understanding of the body, bringing it into conflict with itself and with other things, as in emotion."² As a felt disruption within the ordered world of knowledge, the event can never be an object of knowledge like any other. And yet a discourse about the event necessarily risks positing it as an object to be known, to be grasped as a transparent, determinate signification. In other words, such a discourse cannot help but to bring into relief the meaning of the event—what happens—and thereby to obscure the resistance to meaning that is essential to its character as event. It is impossible, of course, simply to leap outside the space of meaning and to make the event present as a pure, unmediated alterity. Lyotard's task, rather, is somehow to make present from within the order of signification the event whose most salient characteristic is to resist such presentation.

Broadly speaking, we can recognize in the development of Lyotard's thought two distinct conceptualizations of the relation between representation and the event that resists it. In his *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*, James Williams situates this distinction as one between duplicity and duality.³ The conception of a duplicity between representation and the event is reflected most clearly in Lyotard's earlier works, including most prominently *Discours, figure* and *Libidinal Economy*, but also in *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* and *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud*. According to this conception, events are immediately present to representation. Discourse at once orients us toward clear, determinate significations and contains within itself the force that disrupts them. The model for this conception comes primarily from the specifically "economic" aspect of Freud's metapsychology, which is most prominent in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* and in Chapter 7 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. From the economic point of view, the mind is understood as a "psychical apparatus" whose function is to bind and unbind psychical energy, with the goal of keeping the total quantity of that energy circulating within the system as low as possible. As I shall attempt to demonstrate below, the functioning of the psychical apparatus in dreams provides an especially perspicuous example of the event as duplicity.

The conception of duality, on the other hand, is articulated most clearly in *The Differend*.⁴ This conceptualization of the event takes as its beginning point what Lyotard calls the phrase. Although he does not provide a definition of this term, we can understand the phrase as the brute fact of the "it happens that," the fact that there is something and not nothing.⁵ The phrase presents "something." But the meaning of that presentation, the "what happened" that renders determinate the bare "it happened that . . .

,” can only be given by a second phrase that is linked onto the first. This second phrase *situates* the presentation of the first phrase. An officer in the military, for example, cries *Avanti!* and charges toward the enemy. (*TD*, 30) This is a phrase: something has happened, but the determination of that “something” awaits the phrase that links onto it and that fixes its meaning. If the soldiers link onto the officer’s phrase by following him into battle, then “what happened” with the officer’s phrase will have been the initiation of an attack against the enemy. If, on the other hand, the soldiers link on to the officer’s phrase by crying *Bravo!*, then “what happened” will have been the officer’s demonstration of a laudable degree of courage. In either case, the event and its meaning are separated by an ineluctable temporal deferral. Against the model of event as duplicity, then, the model of duality suggests that the event can never be immediately present to its representation. It is given rather at a distance that is unreachable always already: the phrase that situates or represents it always arrives too late.

In two works published after *The Differend—Heidegger and “the jews”* and “Emma: Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis”—Lyotard returns to Freud in order further to develop the idea of event as duality. In these works, Lyotard articulates the temporal deferral between presentation and situation in terms of Freud’s concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, which is translated in the *Standard Edition* of Freud’s works as “deferred action.” The case of Emma, described in Freud’s *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, provides an especially compelling example of the phenomenon.⁶ At the age of twelve Emma went into a shop, where she witnessed two of the shop assistants laughing. For reasons that were not at all self evident, this experience frightened Emma to such a degree that she ran out of the store. In therapy Emma was able to link this

memory to an even earlier memory: “On two occasions when she was a child of eight she had gone into a small shop to buy some sweets, and the shopkeeper had grabbed at her genitals through her clothes.” (*SE I*, 354) It seems, then, as if the affect associated with the traumatic experience at age eight was reawakened in the experience in the shop at age twelve. But this turns out not to be the case: the affect that was apparently repeated at age twelve was never actually experienced at age eight. The affect, which seems appropriate to the situation that was chronologically first, is experienced for the first time only in the later situation. At age eight, Emma’s psychical apparatus lacks the capacity to bind, and thus to represent, the force of the excitation: there is, as Lyotard puts it, “a shock without affect.”⁷ In the experience at age twelve, on the contrary, there is “an affect without shock:” nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and yet she found herself overcome with fear. This experience at age twelve is an event in the later Lyotard’s sense of the term: it makes present the fact “*that* there is something, without being able to tell *what* it is.” (*HJ*, 16) As in the case of the officer who cried *Avanti!*, the event and its meaning are separated by an unbridgeable temporal gap. But in the case of *Nachträglichkeit*, the unbridgeable character of the gap is even more pronounced: what is presented by the affect-phrase (Emma’s fear at age twelve) as having taken place at age eight is something that had never been a lived present at all. This, according to Lyotard, captures the essence of the event as duality: “that *there is* ‘comes before’ *what* there is.” (*HJ*, 16)

In the period following the publication of *Libidinal Economy*, Lyotard began to criticize his earlier attempts to think the event as duplicity. Specifically, he characterized the libidinal economic account as a “pure metaphysics” that relied excessively on

concepts taken directly from psychoanalysis.⁸ The supposed naivety of the earlier conception of the event consisted in its failure to recognize that the concepts of psychoanalysis are best understood in terms of the philosophy of phrases advanced in *The Differend*. James Williams argues, however, that there is an important advantage that the earlier conception has over the later, viz. that it allows Lyotard to work “within signs and language without having to admit a necessary failure to represent or understand events. . . .”⁹ I agree with Williams that there are powerful conceptual tools for thinking the event in Lyotard’s earlier work that are sacrificed in his later work. In this paper, then, I will attempt to defend the earlier Lyotard against the criticisms of the later Lyotard by showing that we *can* experience the event as a disruption of discourse from within discourse. I will focus primarily on *Discours, figure*, where Lyotard establishes most rigorously his conception of the event in terms of duplicity. I will begin by following his argument in the first half of the book, where he presents figural sense as an imbrication of the heterogeneous, yet inextricable, orders of signification and designation. I will interpret Lyotard’s argument as showing that the event is essentially an event of sense. I will then turn to the second half of *Discours, figure*, where Lyotard redescribes this figural sense explicitly in the language of Freudian psychoanalysis. By means of an extended discussion of Freud’s dream of the *Autodidasker*, I will attempt to show how we find ourselves exposed always already to the event of sense and how that event is given as the felt experience of alterity *within* representation. Finally, I will draw some conclusions from Lyotard’s libidinal economic model of figural sense that are relevant more generally to the task of thinking the event.

The Two Orders of Sense

Lyotard begins in *Discours, figure* by presenting a distinction between signification and designation, “two orders of sense which communicate, but which are as a consequence separated.” (DF, 221) This distinction is reflected most clearly in the everyday experiences of reading a text and seeing an object in the world, respectively. To read a text, one must of course see it with the same perceptual apparatus with which one sees other kinds of objects in the world. But in reading one does not relate to the marks on the page as objects. “A text,” Lyotard notes, “is not sensibly profound.” (DF, 9) One does not come to grasp the sense of a text in the way that one determines the sense of an unfamiliar object. One does not view the text from various perspectives, turning it upside-down or walking around it in order to reveal the sides that are hidden in the normal reading position. One could of course do these things, but one would then be looking at the text, not reading it. To read is rather to allow the sensibly given marks on the page to efface themselves in favor of the meaning that they signify. From the perspective of signification, then, the objective properties of the letters—their colors, sizes, fonts, etc.—are irrelevant. In reading, one sees through these material properties to the immaterial significations that they support.¹⁰ (DF, 224) From this example we can recognize an irreducible difference between the orders of signification and designation: to orient oneself toward the signification of a text is precisely not to treat it as a designated object in the world, and conversely to orient oneself toward the text as object in the world is precisely not to read it.

Lyotard presents this distinction more precisely in terms of the different kinds of space proper to each order of sense. As we have seen, sense as designation presupposes a

three-dimensional space in which objects are given in depth. Husserl has shown the way in which the sense of objects is given only through adumbrations. To see a table, for example, is always to see the table from a particular perspective. But that perspective is never given as a discrete, self-enclosed content of consciousness. Rather the perspective points constitutively beyond itself toward other perspectives from which the table could be seen and from which one could progressively flesh out its sense. To see an object, then, is always to be oriented within a three-dimensional space in which things are given as concealing a content that can be unfolded only progressively.

For a conception of the two-dimensional space proper to the order of signification, Lyotard turns to Saussurian linguistics. The “first principle” of Saussurian linguistics states that “the link between signifier and signified is arbitrary.”¹¹ This, of course, is not to say that speakers are free to use any term from the language to signify anything they like. It is to say, rather, that the signifier is unmotivated by external reality. (*CGL*, 69/101) Our use of the word “tree” in English to signify trees, for example, owes nothing to the properties of real trees in the extra-linguistic world. Nothing about actual trees compels us to signify them by means of the word “tree.” In order, then, to grasp the signification of a term, one need not refer to the objects in depth that the term designates. The signification of linguistic terms is rather a function of their place within the system of language itself, taken independently of the uses made of it by speakers and of the external world to which it refers. This system of language (*la langue*) is for Saussure the true object of the science of linguistics. The most essential fact about this new object of linguistics is that “*in the langue there are only differences*. Even more: in general a difference supposes positive terms between which the difference is established, but in the

langue there are only differences, and no positive terms.”¹² (CGL, 118/166) In Saussurian linguistics, then, meaning is treated as value, as a surface effect of the differential relations between the terms of the *langue*. To borrow Saussure’s own example, the English term “sheep” and the French term “*mouton*” have different values even though both can be used to designate the same object in the external world. This is simply a function of the different systems of differences in the English and French languages: the English term “sheep” has the value it does in part because of its difference from the term “mutton,” or sheep qua food. Since the French language makes no distinction between sheep qua animal and sheep qua food, the values of the terms “sheep” and “*mouton*” are not precisely the same. (CGL, 114/160) The value of terms is thus determined wholly in their differential relations with the other terms of the *langue*, and not at all by their reference to the objects in depth that they designate.

This spatial difference between the two orders of sense manifests itself in the transparency of signification and in the opacity of designation. For a native speaker of English, the signification “tree” is given immediately and unproblematically with the term. The signification is thus transparent: it is not given as holding itself in reserve, adumbrating hidden dimensions of content that the speaker might pursue. A native speaker hears the word and the meaning is present all at once. The signifier effaces itself almost completely in favor of the signified. (DF, 76-80) But when a native speaker designates a tree, takes it as the object of his or her discourse, the case is very different. To speak about something is necessarily to set that thing into a distance and thereby to render it opaque. The sense of the designated object is never given immediately and all at once. The tree as object of discourse never effaces itself in favor of its signification in

the way that the signifier “tree” does. Rather there always remains a gap between discourse and its object, something on the side of the object that resists being resolved into its signification. In speaking about an object, one must often take great care to find the words that express its sense most adequately, and this is just because its sense is not transparent. Moreover, no matter how well one knows a particular object, one’s understanding can always be expanded by hearing a different articulation of its sense. The sense of the object, then, is always further on and never simply to be read off its surface in the way that one reads a text.

The difference between the two orders of sense that Lyotard has described is not merely a difference of degree, but is rather “constitutive of an ontological gap.” (*DF*, 211) More specifically, the kinds of negation that sustain the two orders of sense are irreducibly different. As we have seen, “there is a negation implied in the visible: distance, the spacing that is constitutive of space, negation experienced as variability.” (*DF*, 27) Returning to a previous example from Husserl, to see a table is to see it across its adumbrations. Each perspective hollows out a space beyond itself from which one could view the same table. This “spacing that is constitutive of space” gives objects to be encountered as opaque, as holding themselves in reserve and as gesturing toward a sense that is always further on. The negation that sustains the flat space of signification, on the other hand, is the opposition that separates the terms of the *langue*. The English term “sheep” has the value it has in part because of its opposition to “mutton:” to be a sheep is not to be mutton, and to be mutton is not to be a sheep. If our language ceased to maintain the opposition between sheep qua animal and sheep qua food, the value of “sheep” would change, entirely irrespective of what might be the case in the extra-

linguistic space of designation. These two negations are irreducible. We could never arrive at a conception of opposition as it functions in the *langue* merely on the basis of our experience of objects in depth.¹³ (DF, 36) We could never even intend the table across its various adumbrations as a unity of sense if that sense were not already secured at the level of the *langue*. (DF, 34) And conversely, we could never arrive at the spacing that sustains the space of designation merely on the basis of opposition. The value of a term in the *langue* is not given through perspectives that simultaneously reveal and conceal it. It is given all at once with a limpidity that excludes all depth.

Figural Sense

Having demonstrated in extraordinary detail the irreducible heterogeneity and incommensurability of the two orders of sense, Lyotard proceeds to deconstruct their difference, showing how the opacity and depth proper to designated objects can be found within the space of the *langue*. This deformation of the *langue* by the depth of things manifests itself as a resistance to signification at the very heart of the system of signification. This can be seen especially clearly in the case of deictics, terms whose signification is inseparable from their designation. (DF, 34; 119) On the one hand, deictics such as I, you, here, now, this, etc., obviously belong to the *langue*. That is to say, these terms are signifiers and not objects in the external world like pencils and books. But on the other hand, deictics are unlike other signifiers in the *langue* in that they are not transparent: they do not efface themselves immediately in favor of their signifieds. Rather their signification depends on what is the case in the external world. Generally speaking, if someone fails to understand the signification of a term, it is because the term does not have a place in the person's system of language. (DF, 80) One

can make the person understand the signification of the term simply by referring to another signifier or chain of signifiers that has the same value. If the person does not understand the verb “to dread,” for example, one can explain that it means the same as “to fear strongly.” (DF, 119) In this case one need not refer beyond the two-dimensional space of the *langue* to make the signification clear. But if, on the other hand, I request that my friend come here, he or she could know the meaning of “here” only by knowing my actual location in three-dimensional space. It is thus my present speech act (*parole*), and not the *langue* that is presupposed in every particular speech act, that determines the meaning. Deictics, in sum, “open language onto an experience that language cannot stock in its inventory since the experience is that of a *hic et nunc*, of an *ego*, i.e., precisely of a sense-certainty.” (DF, 39)

The case of deictics, in which we observe a collapse of the distinction between *langue* and *parole*, reveals an essential fact about language in general which “our experience of speech does not permit us to challenge,” viz. “that all discourse is cast in the direction of something it seeks to grasp, which is incomplete and open, somewhat like the way the visual field is partial, limited, and extended by a horizon.” (DF, 32)

Language presents things in a space exterior to its own. We can see this clearly with deictics, which are meaningless without their reference to the external world. But it is true of language generally as well. When I speak about a shirt, for example, I refer to the shirt itself and not merely to the value of the term “shirt.”¹⁴ (DF, 74) In its presentive function, language brings its object into relief without, for the most part, appearing to the speaker as another object. It remains in the background while presenting the object in the foreground and thus remains transparent to the speaker. But this presentive power of

language is inseparable from its power to present itself, setting itself at a distance and thus rendering itself opaque. Indeed the two-dimensional space of the *langue* is itself given as an object presented by Saussure's own discourse in the *Course in General Linguistics*. As something presented, the *langue* is given in the same way as any other external object: in depth and across adumbrations. One can examine it from different "perspectives." One can approach the *langue* in its distinction from the particular speech acts that it renders possible, or one can focus on its relation to its historical development. One can also approach the *langue* in abstraction from these concrete manifestations, concentrating exclusively on its systematicity. Just as with Husserl's table, one would get a slightly different view of the *langue* from each of these perspectives, progressively fleshing out the sense of the whole, which is never given from only one perspective.

From this we can conclude that "signification does not exhaust sense, but neither do signification and designation together." (*DF*, 135) These determinations of sense are rather abstractions from a more originary level of sense that Lyotard calls figural. Sense determined as designation abstracts from and presupposes the moment of immediacy and transparency that Saussure has isolated at the level of the *langue*. Sense determined as signification, on the other hand, abstracts from the presentive, distancing function that is equally essential to language. Anterior to these abstract determinations Lyotard isolates a level of sense at which the difference between signification and designation is deconstructed, at which these two are found imbricated but never reconciled. That is to say, at the level of figural sense the opaque, three-dimensional space of designation is found to have contaminated always already the allegedly limpid, two-dimensional space of signification. The extra-linguistic world of designated things is found lodged within

the supposedly purely linguistic space of the *langue*. These two spaces, along with the two negativities that sustain them are, according to Lyotard, separated by an ontological gap. We cannot conceive their co-presence within the ordered, clear space of knowledge, which is also the space of signification. As the imbrication of spaces that are impossible from the perspective of knowledge, figural sense thus reveals itself as the locus of the event.

Insofar as we have our being in a world that is meaningful, we find ourselves constantly exposed to the event of sense in which that meaning is disrupted and in which our sense of ourselves and of our place in the world is shaken. Although we can experience the force of the event in any meaningful context, Lyotard finds the most instructive cases in the processes of the unconscious as described in the work of Sigmund Freud. In the essay “The Unconscious” Freud describes the most salient characteristics of the functioning of the unconscious. Importantly, these processes cannot be cognized on their own terms;¹⁵ in order to describe them, Freud must continually emphasize their differences from the functioning of the conscious and preconscious systems. (*DF*, 274) The first characteristic is that unconscious impulses “are exempt from mutual contradiction.” (*SE XIV*, 186) Essential to our ordered knowledge of the world is the idea that impossible realities cannot co-exist. At the level of the unconscious, however, contradictory cathexes exist together in the form of compromises. Dora, for example, can simultaneously love Herr K and feel disgusted at the very thought of him. These impulses, contradictory from the point of view of representation, co-exist in the symptom of Dora’s cough.¹⁶ Second, the cathexes of the unconscious are freely mobile. In the process of displacement, for example, the cathexis that attaches to one idea is transferred

very easily to another. Likewise, in condensation the cathexes of many ideas that are discrete from the perspective of representation are brought together in a single idea. This free mobility violates the system of oppositions that conditions the ordered world of stable significations. Third, the processes of the unconscious are timeless. Whereas the temporal ordering of events is essential to our cognizing the world, the unconscious makes no distinction whatever between what happened in early childhood, what is happening now, and what might happen in the future. For the unconscious, everything is now. Finally, unconscious processes are wholly indifferent to reality: the only relevant considerations are the strength of the impulses and their suitability to the demands of the pleasure principle. This indifference is manifest as a refusal to take into account the space of designation that is made present by the system of language. (*DF*, 275) In all of these unconscious processes we can recognize a refusal of the ordered world of knowledge right at the most fundamental level of our opening out onto a meaningful world. In sum, we can recognize a kind of nonsense, or figural sense, right at the heart of good sense.

The Dream of the Autodidasker

To help bring out more explicitly and in a more detailed way the event-character of this figural sense, I will focus on Freud's discussion of condensation in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, and specifically on the dream of the *Autodidasker*.¹⁷ One of the most notable features of condensation is the presentation of words as things. The word-thing is given as the complex imbrication of the opaque space of designation with the transparent space of signification. In bringing together a number of discrete ideas into one signifier, condensation disrupts the two-dimensional system of oppositions that

sustains the values of the terms of the *langue*. To condense several significations into one signifier is to force the terms of the *langue* into a three-dimensional space where they take on the opacity of extra-linguistic things. (*DF*, 244) *Autodidasker* is one such product of condensation which formed a particularly vivid part of the content of one of Freud's own dreams. The first point to take note of is that the word is obviously a neologism: it has no place established for it in advance by the regulated system of oppositions that is the German language. Despite this, the word does bear a kind of signification, which it is the task of the dream interpretation to unravel. That *Autodidasker* can have a signification at all, without respecting the system of oppositions in which it figures, demonstrates already that even the meanings of words, to say nothing of things, exceeds the transparency of purely linguistic value.

The word *Autodidasker* can, according to Freud, "easily be analysed into 'Autor' [author], 'Autodidakt' [self-taught] and 'Lasker'" which latter is associated also with the name Lasalle.¹⁸ (*SE IV*, 299) (Lasker and Lasalle are the surnames of German political figures from the time of Freud's youth). But this analysis of the word into its elements does not by itself reveal the meaning of the word. This is because the elements are not themselves purely linguistic, but have their senses inextricably bound up with their reference outside the two-dimensional space of signification. This contamination of significant sense by the sense of the extra-linguistic world disrupts the order of the former. Importantly, the contamination does not arise simply because the new word is put together from elements that had not previously been joined together. The term sociology, for example, was fairly recently a neologism and is made up of the elements *socius* and *logos*. But the new term does not disrupt the discursive order in the least: it

respects entirely the system of differences into which it was introduced. That is to say, the linguistic values for society and *logos* are in no way incompatible from the systematic point of view. Any native speaker of English would recognize without difficulty that society was the kind of thing about which one could give an account. The neologism *socioBoulez* would be entirely different in this regard, however, because one could not determine its sense on the basis of the component values alone.

In this respect *Autodidasker* is like *socioBoulez*. While words like sociology articulate two transparent values together into a new, equally transparent value, words like *Autodidasker* compress together terms that are at least as much material realities as linguistic values. The condensation of incompatible realities into a single term gives that term a sensibly profound, thing-like opacity, but without surrendering its significant sense entirely. So, for example, we can recognize in “auto” a transparent linguistic value. We can also recognize in the whole word *Autodidasker* the value “autodidact,” although this value is concealed by the distortion of the sensibly presented word. This second case is importantly different from the first, however, in that the particular combination of signifier and signified—the sensibly given *Autodidasker* and the value “autodidact”—transgress the order of discourse in a way that “auto” by itself does not. This transgression is present to the degree that “the phonic or graphic vehicle” of signification does not itself pass unperceived. Finally, the element “Lasker” has no signification whatever: it is a proper name and thus takes its whole sense from its designating a reality outside the flat space of discourse. The word *Autodidasker*, as something at once significant and opaque, something determined by oppositions to other linguistic terms

and determined by reference to the extra-linguistic world, can thus be seen as an imbrication of the two heterogeneous orders of sense.

That this is the case can be shown by reviewing the process by which the sense of the term comes to be interpreted. To determine the sense of *Autodidasker* one must occupy simultaneously the impossible spaces of signification and designation. On the one hand, we occupy the flat space of discourse in recognizing that the linguistic values of the component terms obviously contribute to the sense of the term. Although the term to be interpreted is very much distorted, it remains the case that the measure for that distortion is given by the *langue*. To recognize *Autodidasker* as requiring interpretation is to recognize simultaneously the norm of transparency proper to the space of signification and the deviation from that norm. The commitment to the space of discourse is also revealed in the goal of interpretation, which is to eliminate the opacity introduced by distortion and to resolve the term into a clear and unambiguous signification. And yet the very process of interpretation opens the interpreter onto the profound space of designation. There would be no way to know, for example, that “Lasker” is a component of *Autodidasker* if one occupied the space of the *langue* exclusively. Since “Lasker” has no signification, one could proceed in the interpretation only by referring to the three-dimensional man designated by the word. This is even truer in the case of “Lasalle:” one would never suspect the presence of this element in *Autodidasker* without knowledge of the world in which the man figured, and even more specifically, of his meaning for Freud as presented in the specific dream in which his name is remotely suggested.

The presence of these non-discursive elements in the word *Autodidasker* renders the word also a thing. As the course of the analysis given in *The Interpretation of Dreams* demonstrates, the sense of the term is given progressively according to the structure of adumbrations described in Husserlian phenomenology. For example, the word “Lasker,” like the famous phenomenological cube, gives itself in such a way as to suggest hidden sides; like sensible things generally, its sense is given within the play of revealing and concealing. In the context of the dream, the name both presented and disguised Freud’s concern with the domestic happiness of his brother, named Alexander. “I now perceived that ‘Alex’, the shortened form by which we call him, has almost the same sound as an anagram of ‘Lasker’ . . .” (*SE IV*, 300) “Lasker,” then, both reveals and conceals “Alex.” Importantly, the actual man designated by the name Lasker had died of syphilis. The name Alex, in turn, is associated with a particular author (*Autor*), who was a friend of Alex’s and had once made a remark to him about marriage. Thus “Lasker” suggests simultaneously Alex and problems with women, while *Autor* suggests the issue of marriage. Each of the elements that compose *Autodidasker*, then, adumbrates a sense beyond what is immediately given. It is by following up the leads provided by these adumbrations that one arrives at the sense of the whole, just as one arrives at the sense of a cube by picking it up and viewing the sides that are both concealed and revealed in a frontal view.

A Different Difference

The dream of the *Autodidasker* exemplifies clearly the event as a meaningful “something” that nonetheless resists meaning, that retains its opacity in the face of attempts to know it by reducing it to a transparent signification. It also exemplifies a

closely related feature of the event that is equally essential for Lyotard, viz. that it is given most basically as a feeling. More specifically, the event is felt as a difference that cannot be assimilated either to the difference-as-negation that sustains the system of signification or to the difference-as-spacing that sustains the space of designation. As a product of condensation, *Autodidasker* collapses some of the oppositions that sustain the transparent values of linguistic terms. The term *Autor*, for example, has the value it has in part from its opposition to the term *Autodidakt*. By collapsing the opposition between these two terms, *Autodidasker* disrupts the *langue* and the transparent significations that it supports. As a result, the term becomes opaque like a worldly thing. Nonetheless, the term remains importantly different from things in depth. One cannot literally walk around *Autodidasker* or turn it around in one's hand in order to develop the sense that it presents in adumbrations. It is not, in other words, given in the spacing that presents worldly things like tables and pencils. It is rather given as a different difference—a difference from these modes of difference that support the world of determinate, coherent meanings. *Autodidasker* is given to Freud first and foremost not as a meaning or concept, nor as a thing in the extra-linguistic world, but rather as something that weighs on his mind, something that troubles him. It is this felt difference that manifests the existence of the event and that motivates the effort to articulate its sense and to make it known.

That the event is made manifest in the feeling of an uncognizable difference points to a final characteristic of the event of sense as Lyotard presents it in *Discours, figure*. In the experience of the event we are confronted with an alterity and a singularity that challenge our mastery of ourselves and of the meaning we give to the world. It reveals to us a something = x to which we find ourselves compelled to respond, but

without being able to know how. In this experience we come to recognize that we are at least as much subject to sense as we are the subjects of sense. In the case of the *Autodidasker*, Freud wakes up and feels in his mind the weight of a strange and troubling thought. The interpretation that he gives in *The Interpretation of Dreams* is most fundamentally a response to this something = x, to this sense which is not his own and to which he finds himself subjected. And there is no way for him to know whether or not he has responded correctly, whether his interpretation has stated the true meaning of the term. Indeed as a product of condensation, and thus as a disruption of the very order of signification that would provide the measure for truth and knowledge, the term remains strictly unknowable. In order to do justice at all to this uncanny, figural sense, the interpretation by which it would be known must itself violate the ordered system of oppositions that is the condition of good sense. The interpretation must never impose a norm of transparency on phenomena whose most salient feature is precisely to resist that transparency. (DF, 380) Rather interpretation must emerge as the product of an “evenly-suspended attention” in which the interpreter “surrenders himself” entirely to the event.¹⁹ To surrender oneself to the event is to “impoverish [one’s] mind” in such a way as to make it “incapable of anticipating the meaning, the ‘What’ of the ‘It happens. . . .’” (P, 18)

This last characteristic of the event brings us back to the difficulty stated at the very beginning, viz. to give an account of the event that does not reduce it to something known. Such an account would take the event as its object while still doing justice to the alterity that is essential to it. Freud’s attempt to give an interpretation of *Autodidasker* helps us to see that the event is always a duplicity. On the one hand, the event presents

itself as significant. Its signification is never transparent or self-evident, but is rather given as something to be worked out. In general, the event as something = x gives itself as something to be determined. But on the other hand there always remains something that resists the movement to generality and to signification. The event is always singular, always a *this* that is given right along with its signification. The singularity of the event is felt by the subject as an imperative to give it a meaning, but is for that very reason prior to meaning. One can actively give sense to the event only by first surrendering oneself and one's understanding to its singular force.

In *Libidinal Economy*, Lyotard's next major work of philosophy after *Discours*, *figure*, the relation between these two sides of the event is characterized as one of dissimulation.²⁰ With his concept of dissimulation, Lyotard brings into play simultaneously the senses of dissimulate and dissimilate, to conceal and to alter.²¹ (*LE*, 52) Thus, on the one hand the significant side of the event conceals the side of the event that resists signification and that is experienced as a felt singularity. In the Freudian context, the achieved interpretation of the dream or of the symptom conceals the existence of the non-significant "something" that compelled the subject to attempt an interpretation in the first place. The effect of dissimulation as concealing is to make us believe that the meaning of the event effectively captures the being of the event. But on the other hand, dissimulation alters the two sides of the event, subjecting them to important qualitative changes. That which is singular, resistant to signification, and experienced affectively becomes something general and articulable in discourse. Dora's various contradictory libidinal cathexes, for example, become the symptomatic cough, which afflicts her in very particular situations that are meaningful in her life. And

conversely, significations that are from one point of view transparent and guaranteed in their stability by the system of the *langue* become opaque objects of cathexis with strong affective components.

What Lyotard's concept of dissimulation allows us to see is that the tension which arises in any attempt to give an account of the event—the tension between stating *what* the event is by giving its signification and doing justice to what always disrupts that signification—is a tension proper to the event itself. The event disguises itself in giving itself. It is at once meaningful and resistant to meaning, general and singular, intelligible and sensible. As a result, there is no discourse that could state exhaustively the being of the event. Indeed, even “to want to make oneself a partisan of the event, an official of the event” is to fail to appreciate the degree to which the event disrupts established, determinate sense, including the sense of oneself. (*DF*, 22) In sum, one cannot approach the event by constructing a discourse to articulate it or by constructing oneself as the one who will take up the event and make it one's own. Rather “to construct sense is always only to deconstruct signification.” (*DF*, 19) The event, as we saw in the dream of the *Autodidasker*, is given as lodged within the very signification that conceals it. To make this event present, to render ourselves receptive to “the unmistakable, uncanny ‘fact’ that ‘there is’ something here and now” requires that we destabilize the order of signification that makes us so liable to forget it. (*P*, 19) This, I believe, is precisely the task that Lyotard has carried out in *Discours, figure*.

¹ For a reading of Lyotard's work that takes his thinking of the event as its guiding thread, see Geoffrey Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

² Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, figure*, 5th ed. (Paris : Klincksieck, 2002), 22. Hereafter *DF*. Translations from *DF* are my own.

³ James Williams, *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 93-4.

⁴ Bennington locates the shift between these two conceptions in Lyotard's *Rudiments païens*, where he describes the Freudian concepts he had been using as a mere "*façon de parler*," a manner of speaking, thereby suggesting a linguistic approach to the event that would be epistemologically prior to the libidinal economic approach. Bennington, *Lyotard: Writing the Event*, 46.

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 67-68. Hereafter, *TD*

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Project for a Scientific Psychology* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 1* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), 353-356. Hereafter *SE I*.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger and "the jews"*, trans. Andreas Michel and Mark S. Roberts (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 16. Hereafter *HJ*.

⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, "Emma: Between Philosophy and Psychoanalysis" in *Lyotard: Philosophy, Politics, and the Sublime*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York: Routledge, 2002), 25. Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, *Peregrinations: Law, Form, Event* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 11, 13. Hereafter *P*; Jean-François Lyotard, *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1980), 5.

⁹ Williams, *Lyotard: Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*, 94.

¹⁰ "Normally, in the linguistic order, a word is transparent; its meaning is immediate, and it is that meaning which is received. The phonic or graphic vehicle is, so to speak, unperceived."

¹¹ Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 1986), 67; Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de Linguistique Générale*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (Paris : Payot, 1964), 100. Hereafter *CGL*. Page numbers to the left of the slash refer to the English text, and page numbers to the right refer to the French text. Translation modified.

¹² Translation modified.

¹³ “To keep separated the negative of transcendence and that of the system is simply to recognize that with language something absolutely original begins, an *other* that cannot be deduced from the sensible. . . .”

¹⁴ “No denial, writes E. Benveniste, ‘can abolish the fundamental property of language, which is to imply that something corresponds to what is stated. . . .’” Quoted from E. Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris : Gallimard, 1966), ch. VII.

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, “The Unconscious” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XIV*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), 187. Hereafter *SE XIV*.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. VII*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 3-122.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)* in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. IV*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 298-302. Hereafter *SE IV*.

¹⁸ Brackets in original.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Psycho-Analysis” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XVIII*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1955), 239. Cf. Sigmund Freud, “Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XII*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1958), 111-112; Lyotard, *DF*, 381.

²⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1993), 50-54. Hereafter *LE*.

²¹ Cf. Williams, *Lyotard : Towards a Postmodern Philosophy*, 97-100.