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Language, Subjectivity and the Agon ***A Comparative Study of Nietzsche and Lyotard***

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Abstract: This study critically compares the forms of conflict respectively celebrated by Nietzsche and Lyotard. I scrutinize whether Lyotard's 'agonism' can validly claim a Nietzschean heritage. In Section One, I undertake an exegesis of Nietzsche's account of the ancient Greek *agon*. In the subsequent three sections of the paper I then argue that neither Lyotard's linguistics, nor his thoughts concerning the self, freedom and political organisation, can justifiably be classified 'agonistic' in any Nietzschean sense; on the other hand, it is contended that both Nietzsche's account of agency and his political thoughts exhibit a thoroughgoing agonism.

Questo studio mette a confronto criticamente le forme di conflitto analizzate, rispettivamente, da Nietzsche e Lyotard. L'Autore indaga se l'agonismo di Lyotard possa validamente essere ritenuto un'eredità nietzscheana. Nella *Prima sezione*, porta avanti un'esegesi della tesi di Nietzsche sull'agon nella Grecia antica. Nelle successive tre sezioni del saggio, quindi, mostra come né la linguistica di Lyotard, né le sue idee sul sé, la libertà e l'organizzazione politica, possano a buon diritto essere considerati 'agonali' in senso nietzscheano; d'altra parte, si sostiene che sia le tesi di Nietzsche sull'agire sia il suo pensiero politico mostrino un penetrante approccio agonico.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Lyotard, Agon, Political Thought, Freedom
Parole chiave: Nietzsche, Lyotard, agon, pensiero politico, libertà

Introduction

As the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* informs us, the noun 'agon' is of ancient Greek origin and initially signified «'a gathering or assembly' (...) esp. for the public games; hence 'the contest for the prize at the games'.» So, by extension, it has subsequently come to mean «any contest or struggle.»¹ Whereas Nietzsche understands the word specifically in the context of the ancient Greek contest (as his early essay *Homer's Wettkampf* [1872] indicates), its meaning is more ambiguous within the postmodern lexicon. Despite this ambiguity, the idea of the 'agon' occupies a prominent place within the conceptual armature of postmodernist thinkers – and this is particularly the case in the work of Jean-François Lyotard, whose understanding of the *agon* I will be scrutinising in the following study².

Throughout his work, Lyotard repeatedly calls for a society structured around 'agonistics'³ and, in *The Postmodern Condition*, to gloss his use of this word, he instructs readers to «see F. Nietzsche, *Homer's Contest*» (*PMC*, fn.35). Indeed, picking up on this, many commentators seem perfectly at ease speaking uncritically of Lyotard's 'agonistic' philosophy and Nietzsche in the same breath.⁴ As shall be argued below, however, far more caution ought to be exercised before Lyotard's thought is accepted as agonistic in any Nietzschean sense. To be sure, it would appear that as far as sustained comparative studies of Nietzsche and Lyotard – let alone the specifically 'agonistic' aspects of their philosophies

¹ *Agon*, n., in OED Online, <<http://oed.com/view/Entry/4087?redirectedFrom=agon>> [accessed 5 August, 2012].

² For another example, see Foucault (1983), p. 222.

³ See e.g. *TD*, p.26; *JG*, pp.80–1; and *PMC*, pp.16–7.

⁴ See e.g. Weber, A. (1990), p.145; and Cox (1999), p. 145.

– are concerned, there is a conspicuous critical vacuum.⁵ It is conspicuous because there is a discernable parallelism running through their work, insofar as both endeavour to formulate an account of how human freedom can be attained through the management of various conflicts. Nevertheless, throughout, there remain paradigmatic divergences in the conclusions at which they arrive; indeed, the thesis this paper intends to defend is that, despite the convergences in their thought, whereas Nietzsche's wider philosophy *can* justifiably be considered agonistic (according to the criteria presented in HC), Lyotard's cannot.

With this in mind, in the first section of this study I, undertake an exegesis of HC in order to establish the core features of the Nietzschean *agon*. In the following section I then examine the extent to which Lyotard's conflict-based theory of language exhibits these features, arguing that Lyotard disproportionately valorises the disunity of language in a manner uncharacteristic of Nietzsche's understanding of the *agon*. In Section Three, I then compare their respective philosophies of the self and freedom. Nietzsche and Lyotard similarly reject the notion of the monadic *causa sui* self, reconceiving of it as a multiplicity; however, I argue that whereas Nietzsche's account of freedom underlines the need to unify this multiplicity in a fashion analogous to the *agon*, Lyotard's repudiates any such unification in favour of further fragmenting the self. The final section then shows how their politically orientated thoughts can be viewed as attempts to propagate and safeguard their differing conceptions of the free self. Here I contend that both their theories of freedom require domination and the imposition of unifying structures on the diversity of cultural and discursive practices; however, while Nietzsche consciously embraces such necessities in his agonistic aristocratism, Lyotard's pagan politics is unsuccessful in its 'un-agonistic' attempt to suppress them. Though I thus conclude that Lyotard's philosophy should therefore not be classified agonistic, I also suggest, by way of postscript, that aspects of it may still be assimilated into a Nietzschean account of social evolution.

1) Harmony in Dissonance: The *Agon*

Homer's Contest presents itself, from the outset, as a revaluation of values – namely humankind's capacity for envy, ambition and competition. Nietzsche wants to contest the modern day prejudice that these capacities are 'evil' and ought to be repressed. Casting his eye back to pre-Homeric Greece, Nietzsche sees a savage world of unrelenting combat, in which «the cruelty of the victory [was] the pinnacle of life's jubilation» and many thus succumbed to a despairing «nausea at existence» (HC, p.97). The 'Greek genius', however, responded otherwise, affirming both the exultation of victory and the accompanying necessity of *Eris* (strife, rivalry or discord) and envy.

Subsequently, the affirmative attitude of the Greek genius came to dominate every facet of Hellenic thought and practice.⁶ It is important to note, however, that not *all* forms of strife were encouraged. Following Hesiod, Nietzsche identifies two forms of *Eris*: 1) the destructive, pre-Homeric form – a war of all against all in which one strives to win by destroying one's competitor; and 2) the socially and individually beneficial form that characterises the *agon*, in which one aims at feeling one's own sense of excellence and power by actively surpassing one's opponent rather than pushing them down.⁷ With the latter form, the form valorised by Nietzsche, envy can be viewed as a positive affect, driving the productive contest.

⁵ However, see Weber, S. (1985) who cursorily compares Nietzsche's and Lyotard's accounts of agonistics.

⁶ See Heraclitus' interpretation of the *agon* as a cosmological principle, which Nietzsche expands upon in PG (p. 108).

⁷ See Acampora (2002), p.137. This section is indebted to Acampora's extensive writings on the *agon*. See esp. Acampora (2002), (2003a) and (2003b).

According to Nietzsche, when the ‘bad’ Eris is affirmed and embraced, it can be harnessed and converted into the ‘good’ Eris. Hence, from the chaotic world of oppressive tyranny and destructive chaos, a vigorous culture based on creative contest is engendered. The *fecund* belligerence of this environment, Nietzsche claims, allowed for the creation of great works such as those of Plato, Pindar, and Simonides (HC, p.99). Furthermore, the contest *gathers*, coheres and strengthens the Hellenic society – without the *agon*, says Nietzsche, it «only takes a panicky fright to make [the Hellenic state and individual] fall and smash» (HC, p.100). Indeed, Christa Davis Acampora succinctly notes how «competitive relations serve as an organising force of culture by bringing together diverse elements [and] coordinating heterogeneous interests».⁸ However, this unifying function of the *agon* is much more complex than it at first appears.

As with Nietzsche’s perspectivism, it would be a mistake to interpret the agonistic society as a relativistic arena of sheer dissension: within any agonal space, there is always a victor whose judgement or standard of measure provisionally takes precedence and must be obeyed within that space. Within the political domain, the perspective of this victor temporarily guides the state as whole. In short, the *agon*, in a way that is ostensibly Darwinistic, is geared toward the formation of strong values that bind the community. Yet it is also pivotal that this cohesion does not homogenise that which it unites. Heterogeneity *must* be preserved, for it is the *difference* (e.g. of opinion) between two entities that places them in a state of conflict; hence, in this respect, consensus is detrimental to the *agon*. So, though the *agon* plays a unifying role, it is not intended to *completely* harmonise the competing elements. One can therefore see how, for Nietzsche, the excellence of Greek culture emerged from the careful balance of harmony and dissonance – what could perhaps be called a harmony *in* dissonance.

However, because the *agon* promotes the strongest individual into a position of power, this ethos based on contest has a tendency to produce despots whose totalitarian rule favours a total harmony based on terror. Due to this, the balance upon which the *agon* rests is precarious – a danger Nietzsche often welcomed.⁹ The mechanism adopted by the ancient Greeks to prevent disproportioned tyranny was *ostracism*:

The pre-eminent individual is removed so that a new contest of powers can be awakened: a thought which is hostile to the ‘exclusivity’ of genius in the modern sense, but which assumes that there are always *several* geniuses to incite each other to action, just as they keep each other within certain limits, too. That is the kernel of the Hellenic idea of competition: it loathes a monopoly of preponderance and fears the dangers of this, it desires, as *protective measure* against genius – a second genius (HC, p.98).

Evidently, Nietzsche’s formulation of the *agon* is not as Darwinian as it first seemed since being the ‘strongest’ individual can in fact precipitate one’s downfall.¹⁰ The pressing question then becomes: how does one dethrone the strongest individual? What existing literature on HC has failed to remark is that Nietzsche’s account implicitly necessitates a *degree of consensus* among the other competing parties regarding the need to sustain the *agon* and depose this totalising force – particularly within the political domain, where usually no one person is able forcibly unseat the autocrat. A collective effort must therefore be made in order to carry out the ostracism. Agonistic dissensus is thus paradoxically maintained by an underlying consensus. Once again, however, this poise is fragile, and there is the ever-present risk of (re)lapsing into either pre-Homeric savagery (universal dissensus) or a false, decadent belief that consensus can do more than merely undergird fruitful conflict. Nonetheless, when this balancing act *is* achieved, and no single genius is allowed to place themselves outside of the competition, «*several* competing genius» «keep

⁸ Acampora (2006), p. 327.

⁹ See e.g. *TI*, ‘Expeditions of an Untimely Man’, 38; see also *GS*, 283.

¹⁰ See Johnson (2010), pp. 69–71.

each other within certain limits» – that is, the process of limitation becomes *immanent* to the contest as each champion only reigns temporarily, until another contestant outrivals them. It should again be underscored, though, that what is loathed by the agon is not preponderance *per se* – the preponderance of the victor is in fact the keystone of the *agon*, giving it strength and structure – but a *monopoly* of preponderance.

Despite this tendency towards domination, the strong contestant, Nietzsche argues, can also be self-regulating:

...the aim of agonistic education was the well-being of the whole, of state society. For example, every Athenian was to develop himself, through competition, to the degree to which this self was of most use to Athens (HC, 98).

Individual *self*-improvement is therefore aligned with, and limited by, the idea of *collective* improvement. Moreover, also limiting the individual from within was the fear of divine envy, and the understanding that one should never hubristically place oneself above the contest of mortals since one «*never* has the right to enter into a contest with [the gods]» (HC, 97). Despite this drive to prohibit totalising structures, the three limiting ideas which regulate this agonistic society – namely, that the *agon* is the best social model (and threats to it ought to be ostracised); that the wellbeing of the social whole takes precedence; and that the gods exist and should be revered – are, contradictorily, all totalising presuppositions. Without these putative linchpins, the agonistic edifice lacks the requisite limiting factors needed to harness ‘bad’ Eris and stave off decadence and pre-Homeric savagery. The *agon* is therefore unsustainable unless it is supported by certain totalising ideas. This is not to say these ideas are indisputable, but only that the strength of the agonistic state depends on their being accepted as such.

Another aspect of the *agon* that should be highlighted is the way in which it forces us to reconceive of the idea of *measure*. According to Nietzsche, the agonistic contest occurs «in accordance with inviolable laws and standards *which are immanent in that struggle*» and, furthermore, that «the judges themselves [seem] to be striving in the contest» (PG, p.109; my emphasis). The agonistic state, then, affirms the idea of nature as «indifferent without measure» (*BGE*, 9) – i.e. the idea that there are no given, fixed or transcendent criteria for measurement. Nevertheless, although Nietzsche censured the notion of dogmatic measure, he was equally critical of measurelessness.¹¹ The *agon*, an apparatus for immanently creating and adapting strong evaluative criteria, mediates these two extremes: though measure is ever present, alertness to its contingent nature leaves it malleable. As Herman Siemens has observed, the *agon* «names a radically inconclusive form of conflict» since, within any given contest, standards of measure are prevented from crystallising to such an extent that they could dam up the ongoing process of revaluation.¹²

Not all such criteria, though, can be treated as strictly immanent to a particular contest. Implied within HC, is the fact that ideal of the *agon*, against which all new criteria and victors can be evaluated («how well do they protect and propagate the agonistic ethos?»), is a standard of measurement that universally reigns over the agonistic state. This is because it is required in order to judge whether ostracism, which safeguards the *agon*, is required. This appears to be sheer hypocritical inconsistency: a totalising precept that there ought to be no totalising precepts. But, I would argue, this is not a weakness, in fact it is the very source of Hellenic strength – their greatness arising from their ability to contain the force of this contradiction *without* reconciling, and thereby neutralising it.¹³ To be sure, the need for imposing universal systems of measure – part of the Apollonian drive to order

¹¹ See e.g. *HH*, I, 114. See also Tongeren (2002) for an in depth study of the issue of measure in Nietzsche’s work.

¹² Siemens (2002), p. 97.

¹³ See *DW*, p. 122.

– was always pulling against the ancient Greeks' contradictory awareness of the Dionysian disorder of reality. Indeed, appositely, Tongeren calls Nietzsche's 'greatest discovery' the realisation that «great Greek culture emerged not so much from the victory of Apollo over Dionysus, but from *the continuing struggle between the two*».¹⁴

Having briefly surveyed Nietzsche's conception of the *agon*, one can clearly see that it cannot be described as either universal dissension or 'any contest or struggle'; rather, it is more correctly defined by the following characteristics:

1. It celebrates and rewards victory by granting power and legitimacy to the strongest set of rules and values while also ensuring these stay open to contestation.
2. It unites heterogeneous elements a) in their participation in the practice of contest; and b) by authorising (albeit temporarily) a binding set of common rules and values.
3. It promotes excellence and self-transformation.
4. It tolerates (if not actively invites) the risk of tyranny.
5. It depends upon the majority's acceptance and defence of certain totalising concepts (which serve to limit the hegemony of any single victor).
6. Its fertility arises from the various contradictory oppositions – especially, that which exists between unity and plurality – which it manages to balance and contain in a state of *dynamic equilibrium*.

However, it should be remarked, by way of addendum, that *Homer's Contest* is not explicitly normative. Nietzsche is not proposing that we ought to mimic the ancient Greeks, but, rather, he insinuates that we should abandon our «emasculated concept of modern humanity» (HC, p.95) and potentiate contemporary culture. What Nietzsche's philological study ultimately reveals is that this can be achieved by *rebalancing* the aforementioned contradictions and recalling the need to embrace (and regulate) conflict, victory, domination, and envy in the fight against modern decadence. Nonetheless, we have established the basic criteria of the *agon* that Nietzsche at the very least implicitly endorses in HC; hence, we should now turn to Lyotard's linguistics so as to determine the extent to which it fulfils these features.

2) Fighting Words: Lyotard's Combative Theory of Language

In *PMC*, Lyotard boldly states that «to speak is to fight [...] and speech acts fall with the domain of a general agonistics» (*PMC*, p. 10). However, as we shall now see, Lyotard does not so much view this as an 'agonistic' fight between *persons* but, rather, between opposed linguistic elements.

The foundational premise upon which Lyotard tries to ground his thesis that language is in agonistic conflict with itself is that language is made up of a multiplicity of heterogeneous 'phrase regimens'¹⁵ and 'genres of discourse'. Every phrase, according to Lyotard, belongs to a specific regimen – e.g. an ostensive phrase would belong to the 'showing' regime, and a definition would belong to the 'describing' regime. Then, because these are heteromorphic, they are incommensurable and can neither be translated into one another nor used to legitimate one another – i.e. from a denotive statement such as 'the door is open' one cannot deduce or justify a prescriptive such as «you should close the door» (*TD*, p. xii). Genres of discourse, on the other hand, «supply rules for linking together heterogeneous phrases, rules that are proper for attaining certain goals» (*ibid.*). In the artistic genre of discourse, for example, one might join questions, exclamations and ostensive phrases in order to make the reader feel empathy.

Like phrase regimens, genres of discourse are also heterogeneous and incommensurable, each being distinguished by the idiosyncratic end it aims toward. When

¹⁴ Tongeren (2002), p. 13.

¹⁵ What Lyotard, after Wittgenstein, called 'language games' in *PMC*.

one feels the inclination to say or do something, Lyotard contends, this is not the effect of our will (to assume so is mere vanity); rather, «our intentions are tensions [...] exerted by genres» (*TD*, p.136). It should thus be underscored how, for Lyotard, the conflict described in his linguistics 'is not between humans' so much as different genres of discourse (*TD*, p. 137). In this section, therefore, I will be examining how this war of phrases and genres takes place without reference to the human subject and any potential freedom they may have.

Crucially, there is no metagenre which is able to unite the heterogeneous genres with an overarching telos. Notwithstanding, many genres of discourse have had the *pretension* of possessing this status, something Lyotard imputes to both Enlightenment humanism and Hegel's speculative philosophy – in the case of the former, the meta-stake is the universal emancipation of humanity, whereas for the latter it is the realisation of Absolute Spirit (See *PMC* pp.33–5). In Section Three, we shall be returning to Lyotard's criticism of these 'metanarratives'.

Presently, though, what remains to be seen, is why these incommensurable linguistic elements must necessarily be in a state of conflict instead of being able to remain discrete. The best way to approach this explanandum is through Lyotard's view of the arbitrary relationship between language and 'reality' (signifier and signified) – a position most clearly evinced in his critique of proper names. Lyotard argues that although a name is a distinct or 'rigid' node within a network of names that make up the world, it is, examined in isolation, nothing more than an 'empty designator' (*TD*, p.48). To fulfil its ostensive role the name must be contextualised within a phrase and thereby given a sense (meaning). For example, the sense of 'Stalin' could be 'immoral megalomaniac' (we might derogatorily say of anyone: 'he's a right little Stalin'); conversely, though, someone might point to a poster of Stalin and exclaim: 'the great Stalin!' where the sense of 'Stalin' might be 'admirable Russian leader'. The number of different identifying descriptions that can be attributed to 'Stalin', and the number different heterogeneous phrases and genres it can be employed within, is inexhaustible (*TD*, p. 47). According to Lyotard, with no transcendent criteria to judge which of these perspectives 'truly' describe the reality signified by this name, these meanings vie to assert themselves over one another. Thus, «reality is not what is 'given' to this or that 'subject'» (*TD*, p.4), rather it is fought over in the realm of semantics – as Bill Readings astutely notes, «Lyotard invokes the function of the name in order to make the point that names are not determined by reality but are the locus of a struggle as to what the world can be.»¹⁶

Likewise, exactly the same kind conflict is to be found occurring over the meanings of whole phrases and collections of phrases. Indeed, Lyotard maintains that this struggle over reality is absolutely unavoidable. This is because every phrase must *necessarily* be linked on to – there cannot be a last phrase (even silence constitutes a phrase for Lyotard); however, without any metacriteria, *how* to link remains contingent (*TD*, p. 29). Regardless of what end a phrase awaiting linkage was originally put to, it can always be commandeered by another genre and put to a different end, given a different meaning, and be taken to signify a different reality. At any one time, therefore, there is a multiplicity of possible concatenations competing to link on to the previous phrase. For Lyotard, this gives rise to what he calls a differend:

a differend [*différend*] would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments. [...] A wrong results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse (*TD*, xi).

¹⁶ Readings (1991), p. 121.

Differends arise in the fight over reality because only one possible phrase and genre – the victor – can be actualised, whilst the others, along with their perspectives of reality, are silenced or ‘wronged’ like the subjugated party in the above quote (*TD*, p.29).¹⁷ The consequence of this is not only that «language is in a permanent state of civil war»,¹⁸ but, as Manfred Frank stresses, this is a war «carried out by means of naked power and without an arbiter».¹⁹ Certainly, Lyotard does not see dominant linguistic structures (genres) as provisionally legitimate arbiters (as we might expect if the theory was truly agonistic), a belief which can be brought into relief by briefly explicating the macrocosmic presence of the differend.

Within any period of history, Lyotard argues, the criteria or *measure* of one particular genre tends to reign supreme. Thus, within the Occident, the Enlightenment brought with it the dominance of the cognitive genre, and, subsequently, the onset of global capitalism has engendered the hegemony of the economic genre. Lyotard describes this will to domination as a genre’s «wanting to have too much of it» (*JG*, 99), which, he believes, necessarily involves injustice since it silences (wrongs) the other subordinate genres. The preponderant genre does this by imposing *its* criteria of judgement, *its* perspective of reality and *its* definitions upon them, and in so doing gives rise to differends. Lyotard views this attempt to subjugate other genres as an attempt to «totalise them into a real unity» – a unity which, he stresses, can only ever be illusory. «The price to pay for such an illusion – Lyotard continues – is terror» (a concept which shall be explicated in more detail below); and from thence comes his postmodern rallying cry (indubitably aimed at Habermas’ utopian vision of a society founded upon the totalising ideal of consensus²⁰): «let us wage war on totality» (*WIP*, pp. 81–2). According to this model, any attempt to arbitrate the war of phrases and genres is therefore always illegitimate, and any unity or cohesion that such arbitration may bring about is always fraudulently imposed and of negative value.

2.1) Language as a ‘Pre-Homeric’ Field of Conflict

Before we try to ascertain whether Lyotard’s model is compatible with Nietzsche’s account of the *agon*, two pressing problems to which the former gives rise must be briefly examined since they raise doubts as to whether there is any linguistic conflict at all, let alone agonistic conflict. The first problem concerns the absolute heterogeneity of language and can be summed up as follows: if linguistic elements are *absolutely* different, then how can they be in conflict since, as Frank asserts, «conflicts presuppose a *common* mutual reference, as *that about which* there is conflict.»²¹ Although this problem is perhaps not as damning as Frank’s critical analysis suggests, it illuminates how, in contrast to the *agon*, there is a lack of balance in Lyotard’s account, which emphasises the difference and plurality within language whilst repressing the overlaps and families of resemblance that, as Wittgenstein notes, exist between its diverse parts.²² Thus, if we are to assent to Lyotard’s combative theory of language, we must qualify his ‘*absolute* difference’ thesis so that it reads: «total heterogeneity *beyond* the minimum unity required *to allow for conflict.*»

The second problem specifically concerns the differend: if the defining feature of a differend is that the silenced linguistic element lacks the ability to articulate the fact that it has been wronged, then, as Alexander Weber observes, «the [repressed] variants remain

¹⁷ See also *TD*, pp. 55–6.

¹⁸ Weber, A. (1990), p. 142.

¹⁹ Frank (2003), p. 120.

²⁰ See e.g. Habermas (1991), pp. 1–68.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.122.

²² See Wittgenstein (2009), §67.

beneath the surface and hence cannot be expressed, or even proved to exist». ²³ How, then, can we ever know that a differend has occurred? Lyotard, well aware of this bind, argues that a differend «is signalled by what one ordinarily calls a feeling: ‘one cannot find the words’ etc.» (*TD*, p.13). To insist, as Weber does, that we must be able to *speak* about the differend if it is to be taken seriously, is to impose the rules of cognitive genre on Lyotard’s theory, which is precisely what Lyotard is discouraging. Because Lyotard’s theory resists logocentrism and the proof criteria commanded by the cognitive genre, ultimately, as Williams rightly points out, «we must [either] ‘feel’ his theory to be true» or turn away unconvinced. ²⁴ Nonetheless, Lyotard’s appeal to feeling remains a weak form of argumentation, for if one does not ‘feel’ the differend oneself, his combative theory of language falls apart since there is no further evidence that any conflict or repression has taken place.

But then, even if we read Lyotard charitably on these two points – conceding that we *do* ‘feel’ the differend and that language is therefore defined by conflict – it must be remembered that conflict remains only a necessary (as opposed to sufficient) condition for agonistics. To be sure, though the conflict characterising Lyotard’s model *does* unite heterogeneous elements in combat, his interpretation of this conflict does not align itself with the principles of the *agon*. Indeed, there is one fundamental feature of his model that firmly precludes the *agon* analogy: it does not acknowledge «the exciting impulse [to struggle for *dominance*], terrible as it [is], and [regard] it as *justified*» (*HC*, p.96). Though Lyotard’s study of language does, undeniably, affirm struggle *per se*, he does not affirm victory. Instead, he concentrates on the repression of the defeated party, speaking of victory only in terms of the ‘wrong’ it entails. Furthermore, for Lyotard legitimacy is never *granted* to the triumphant genre, which can never *legitimately* unite other genres by imposing its particular measure; such ascendancy is indissociable from terror, and, Lyotard says in a condemnatory tone, «is always assisted by the sword» (*JG*, p.99) – that is, it is always involves unjust coercion.

In addition to the above, since Lyotard valorises the natural disunity of language, whilst unity and totalisation are judged as negative in value, his model is bereft of the poise that pervades the *agon*. Indeed, we are instead faced with a model far more reminiscent of Darwin’s famous wedge metaphor²⁵ – an overabundance of disunited phrases and genres being relentlessly driven into what are, at any one moment, a limited number of places to concatenate. In light of this, it seems it would be far more accurate to categorise this oppressive, Hobbesian *bellum omnium contra omnes* as a ‘pre-Homeric’ form of conflict.

3) Freedom and Intrasubjective Agonistics

Turning his gaze inwards, Lyotard highlight how our epistemological separation from reality ‘in itself’ also raises questions regarding the nature of subjectivity. In this section, I will argue that although Lyotard’s critique of subjectivity is in many ways comparable to that of Nietzsche, a marked divergence in the two theories is revealed when they are compared against the criteria of the *agon* that were established in Section One. I will first briefly illustrate how both Nietzsche and Lyotard similarly reconceive of the self as multiple; subsequently, I shall then critically compare their thoughts on freedom to demonstrate that whereas Nietzsche calls for an agonistic unification of the self, Lyotard’s calls for its further fragmentation.

²³ Weber, A. (1990), p. 143.

²⁴ Williams (1998), p. 100.

²⁵ See Darwin (1975): ‘nature may be compared to a surface covered with ten-thousand sharp wedges; [...] the one [wedge] being driven in deeply forcing others out (p. 208).

3.1) *From Unity to Multiplicity: Rethinking the Self*

3.1.1) *Nietzsche*

Not only does Nietzsche derogate dogmatic faith in the atomism of the soul (*BGE*, 12) but he demotes the idea of a unified subject-substance or *res cogitans*, which Descartes held to be an immediate certainty, to the status of a ‘perspectival illusion’ (*WP*, 518; *KSA* 12:2[91]). The fictive notion of a unified Cartesian ‘I’ is, according to Nietzsche, fabricated by a process of concept formation parallel to that explicated in the previous section: an underlying similitude is abstracted from a multitude of unique self-experiences (*WP*, 485; *KSA* 12:10[19]). Nietzsche refers to this simplification of the self as ‘useful’ and as ‘a condition of life’, since it enables our survival by simplifying and making manageable the chaotic multiplicity of (interior) reality (*WP*, 492; *KSA* 11:4[21]; and *WP* 483; *KSA* 11:38[3]). However, for Nietzsche, this useful fiction has become petrified in language – that is, in the rigid first person pronoun and the grammatical subject. Nietzsche’s contention is that, forgetting the pragmatic origins of these linguistic constructions, we fallaciously take them to index a metaphysical truth; thus, «people came to believe in ‘the soul’ as they believed in the grammatical subject» (*BGE*, 54).

Contra the subject-substance hypothesis, Nietzsche adduces the «evidence of the [body, which] reveals a tremendous multiplicity» (*WP*, 518; *KSA* 12:2[91]), to suggest other, more accurate hypotheses such as «the ‘soul as subject-multiplicity’ and the ‘soul as a society constructed out of drives» (*BGE*, 12). Every one of these drives – e.g. to sleep, eat, learn, socialise, dominate and etcetera – is then «a kind of lust to rule; each one has its perspective that it would like to compel all other drives to accept as a norm» (*WP*, 481; *KSA* 12:7[60]).

So, what Nietzsche refers to as the ‘self’ is the totality of drives that compose any particular human organism at any given moment. Crucially, for Nietzsche, *there is no seat of subjectivity or ‘self’ that is external to these drives*. But, if this is the case, from whence does our ‘ego’ or feeling of ‘I-ness’ come? After all, ‘I’ often feel and control impulses as though they were impinging upon ‘me’. For Nietzsche, though, the answer is straightforward: we simply identify our ‘ego’, or ‘I’, with the drive that happens to be preponderant, and therefore directing the human organism, at any given moment.²⁶

Thus, for all of the above reasons, Nietzsche, echoing Hume, asserts that the *monadological* ‘subject’ or ‘self’ is «not something given, it is something added and invented and projected behind what there is» (*WP*, 481; *KSA* 12:7[60]).²⁷ It is nonetheless important to remember that Nietzsche’s seemingly eliminativist polemic against conventional philosophies of the self is *not*, as Tracy Strong reminds us, «a denial that there ‘is’ such a thing as a subject, but rather a critique of the presupposition that the subject has a natural and given unity of any kind.»²⁸

3.1.2) *Lyotard*

Like Nietzsche’s, Lyotard’s critique of the subject-substance hypothesis is intertwined with his critique of language. For Lyotard, the meaning of ‘the self’ (or ‘I’, or ‘the subject’, and etcetera) is, like any other signifier, an unbounded structure, always exposed to alternative definitions and permutations in the reality it is held to signify. The reality of the self, which is always based upon the particular linguistic context in which an individual is positioned, is therefore *not* a pre-given, immediate reality (*TD*, 46). Hence, «philosophical examination never reveals [...] a subject-substance. It reveals phrases, phrase universes and occurrences» (*TD*, p.97).

²⁶ See *D*, 109; and *BGE*, 19; see also Parkes (1994), p. 292.

²⁷ Cf. Hume (1978), pp. 252–9.

²⁸ Strong (1985), p. 169.

In *PMC*, Lyotard, in a manner reminiscent of Foucault, is keen to criticise how closed definitions of the subject have, in the past, been invalidly utilised by philosophical movements such as Enlightenment humanism and speculative metaphysics to legitimate the domination of the cognitive genre. This was achieved by fraudulently placing this genre's knowledge claims within the metanarrative of either a) in the case of speculative metaphysics, the subject-as-spirit, or b) in the case of Enlightenment humanism, the emancipated rational subject.²⁹ These closed definitions of a universal subject, were thereby used to forcibly unite heterogeneous phrases and genres by subjecting them to one evaluative criterion («to what extent do they facilitate the development of this conception of the subject?»).

In spite of his denigration of these fixed definitions, Lyotard does proffer his own alternative. Because the reality of the subject can only ever be established locally in the context of particular phrases, Lyotard categorically states that «we are nothing but what our phrases make of us» (TWR, p.408). As Haber has observed, since the subject is viewed as linguistically constituted and there is no transcendental self, «whatever is true of language will *eo ipso* be true of the human/social subject».³⁰ (As we have already found that Lyotard's model of language is *not* agonistic, his philosophy of the self, on this ground alone, already appears to not be agonistic – however, we should continue.) By this account, the various positions one occupies across the different types of phrases and genres of discourse are, like these different linguistic elements, heteromorphic and incommensurable. Indeed, Lyotard conceives of the self as a heterogeneous multiplicity «dispersed in clouds of [linguistic] elements» (*PMC*, p. xxiv), and, consequently, claims that «we are ourselves several beings» (*JG*, p. 51).

However, it is important to add that Lyotard's description of subjectivity remains frustratingly underdeveloped and, as Gary Browning notes, his «derogation of the self [...] is not supported by a sustained analysis of how the self relates to its alleged dispersion in multifarious language games.»³¹ Though this unwillingness to describe the self with any finality is consistent with his view that to do so would be mere pretence, his abstruseness means that he fails to convincingly refute the idea that the self is at least partially unified (as is suggested by our discovery that linguistic elements cannot, by Lyotard's logic, be *completely* heterogeneous [p. 15]).³² These problems aside, it remains that Lyotard, like Nietzsche, rebuts the idea of the self *qua* substance, reconceiving of the self as multiple. As shall now be shown, though, their thoughts on freedom radically diverge over the question of how this multiplicity should be treated.

3.2) Nietzsche on Freedom

Throughout his work, Nietzsche discusses the idea of the free will in two contrasting tones. On the one hand, he dismisses it as a 'fable' (*HH*, I, 39), and, on the other, he speaks with admiration of the 'sovereign individual', who he calls a «master of the *free will*» (*GM*, II, 2). Yet, as we shall now see, since these stances respond to distinct conceptions of free will – the former referring to the *causa sui* free will, the latter referring to free will understood as agency (a distinction which will be explicated) – they are not contradictory.

Nietzsche abrogates belief in the spontaneous, *causa sui* free will, viewing this conception not only as a «type of logical rape» (*BGE*, 19), but also as a means for making

²⁹ See *PMC*, p.xxiii and pp. 31–7.

³⁰ Haber (1994), p. 15.

³¹ Browning (2000), p.119. Indeed, Browning repeatedly censures Lyotard for his inadequate account of subjectivity (see e.g. p. 22, p. 39, and p. 169).

³² See also Schrag (1997) who, criticising Lyotard, claims that because there is in fact 'an overlapping and inmixing' of language games, there is a corresponding degree of self-identity and unity to the self that traverses them (pp. 27–34).

the strong feel guilty for expressing their strength and allowing the weak to feel empowered since they can believe that they *choose* to be meek (*GM*, I, 13). Nietzsche argues that what is referred to as ‘freedom of the will’ is in fact the pleasurable affect of command that the provisionally dominant drive (our ‘ego’) experiences when it commands other, obeying drives and successfully undertakes desired actions. Upon reflection, we distinguish the part of ourselves that enjoyed this affect from that which obeyed. This leads us to fallaciously infer, *après coup*, the existence of a metaphysically free, and absolutely commanding will – i.e. a singular and fixed ‘doer’ that exists *outside* the drives (*BGE*, 19). Freedom of the will, then, is not the cause of our actions, but is, rather an illusion to which those actions give rise.

Like the fiction of a pre-given unified subject, this belief in a *causa sui* free will is then perpetuated by the grammatical structure of language. The division of the Indo-European sentence into subject, object and verb buttresses the illusion that there actually exists a metaphysically free ‘doer’ doing the verb (*WP*, 556; KSA 12:2[152]).³³ Once again, though, we find that Nietzsche considers this act of falsification – i.e. «our habit of regarding all our deeds as consequences of our will» – as vital to our survival since it allows us to think of ourselves as fixed and distinct points of being, that is, *as individuals*, which in turn prevents our sense of self from «vanish[ing] in the multiplicity of change» (*WP*, 488; KSA 12:9[98]). Clearly, then, Nietzsche is not insisting that we do away with the sensation of our independent efficacy.

In fact, just as Nietzsche criticises the idea of a *causa sui* free will, he is equally critical of what he calls the ‘mythology’ of the ‘un-free will’ which is employed to diminish feelings of responsibility (*BGE*, 21).³⁴ Repackaging Kant’s thesis in the first critique, Nietzsche tells us that the law of causation is a human fabrication superimposed upon ‘real life’.³⁵ We therefore reach the impasse Kant describes in the ‘Third Antinomy’ – namely, that we are unable to establish whether, metaphysically, we are absolutely free or determined.³⁶ Owing to this, Nietzsche’s project was fundamentally to rethink freedom *not* as a state that is either metaphysically pre-given or foreclosed, but, instead, as one that is *achieved*.

For Nietzsche, owing to the mixing of classes and races, we moderns possess an exceptionally multiple and internally conflictual self. The situation is analogous to that of the Greeks, in that we can either a) despair at this pre-Homeric anarchy of the drives and decadently try to seek a unity based on pacification, or b) affirm and harness the force of this conflict by making it agonistic (*BGE*, 200 and 208). There is unfortunately insufficient time to give a comprehensive exegesis of Nietzsche’s account of freedom and the drives; however, it will suffice for the purposes of this paper to delineate some of its key features in order to ascertain how and why Nietzsche advises one organise one’s self agonistically. If we are to understand Nietzsche’s account of freedom at all, though, we must first define agency – that is, what it means to act as an agent. For this, we should invoke Al-Gazali, who offers us a particularly lucid and apposite definition of the genuine agent as «one (...) from whom the act proceeds together with the will to act by way of choice and the knowledge of what is willed».³⁷ Let us now consider how Nietzsche’s account of freedom embodies this conception.

Nietzsche’s own vision of the free agent is best encapsulated in his exalting depiction of the ‘sovereign individual’, whom he describes as «...an autonomous, supra-ethical individual (...) with his own, independent, enduring will (...). This man who is now free, actually *has* the *prerogative* to promise, this master of the *free* will» (*GM*, II, 2).

³³ Cf. *HH*, II, *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, 11; see also *WP*, 631 (KSA 12:2[139]).

³⁴ Compare with the hard determinism of *HH*. See e.g. *HH*, I, 18 and 106. See also Janaway (2009), p. 63 for a closer analysis of this shift.

³⁵ See Kant (2007), *Transcendental Deduction*, A 90–2.

³⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 409–15.

³⁷ Al-Gazali (1997), p. 57.

The importance of being able to fulfil one's promises is repeatedly emphasised throughout this section of GM. In order to have this capacity, Ken Gemes points out, one must first have established a stable hierarchy among one's drives – something Nietzsche does not think the average modern person has attained.³⁸ We should now look at why such organisation is a prerequisite for making reliable promises and acting as an agent.

Every drive is an impulse toward a certain end. Each drive has its own unique objective (*HH*, I, 32) that it lusts to realise by taking charge of the human organism. If the individual is to avoid being a 'weak willed' «disgregation of impulses (...) lacking any systematic order» (one that is fickle and whose acts will feel merely capricious), *there must be a firm ruling drive that can unify this diversity of impulses*, organising them into an enduring power structure. Such hierarchy means that the energy of the diverse drives can be channelled toward a stable, primary end, thus engendering a 'strong will' and making the individual *reliable* (able to fulfil promises) (*WP*, 46; *KSA* 13:14[219]).³⁹ As Gemes argues, without this stability, «you can give no guarantee that the ascendant drive at the time of your making a promise will be effective when the time comes to honour that promise.»⁴⁰ However, it should also be added that 'free', for Nietzsche, means self-determining «in the sense of 'not being pushed and shoved, without a *feeling of compulsion*'» (*WLN*, p.16). So, for Nietzsche, agency is not, as Kant and Spinoza suggest, acting independently of one's passions and desires, rather, it is acting in accordance with these compulsions provided they are coordinated, stable, and are not the result of external pressure applied by moribund moral conventions.⁴¹

The ability to make reliable promises – i.e. ones grounded in organised compulsions that one can attribute to oneself – lies at the heart of what it means to be an agent. This is because it gives the individual a strong and steady sensation of *intention*, so, when the projected action is performed and the promise fulfilled, the individual can *feel* that, in the terms of Al-Gazali, she had *knowledge of*, and chose (from *inner compulsion*) to commit the act *before* it took place. She can thus feel that she herself genuinely commanded the action and that it was not an act of caprice. With this affect of command (the feeling of 'freedom of will') the individual is then able, retrospectively, to *feel* that «the act proceeded together with the will to act» and therefore qualify as an agent. When Nietzsche encourages us to achieve freedom, then, he is, I believe, goading us to create ourselves (by organising our drives) in a way that maximises the frequency with which we experience freedom as genuine agency.

For this to be possible, our drives must be structured by a chief impulse into a coherent, enduring and hierarchic totality – and indeed, Nietzsche lauds Goethe for just this, for «disciplin[ing] himself into a whole» (*TI, Expeditions of an Untimely Man*, 50). For Nietzsche, an inner unity must be *forged* if freedom is to be attained. However, this glorification of imposed totality seems to imply a tyranny of the soul in which heterogeneous drives are forced into conformity – an idea that is at odds with Nietzsche's celebration of agonistics. Upon closer inspection, though, one finds that Nietzsche did not want strong command and unity to be formed at the expense of plurality and struggle. Rather, self-governance and unity are only strong if perpetually overcoming resistances; hence, «the highest man would have the greatest multiplicity of drives, in the relatively greatest strength that can be endured» (*WP*, 966; *KSA* 11:27[59]). Nietzsche stresses the need to «effect a harmony and concord» between the drives, «but without the need to suppress them or clap them in irons» (*HH*, I, 276). In the same aphorism he also lays emphasis on the need to able to contain contradictory impulses *without* resolution and, he

³⁸ Gemes (2009), p. 37.

³⁹ See also *UM*, III, 2 and *EH*, 'Why I am So Clever', 9.

⁴⁰ Gemes (2009), p. 37.

⁴¹ Cf. Kant (1960), p. 19; and Spinoza (1994), VP 1–20.

explains in *BGE* 284, «seat yourself on them like you would a horse». As Tongeren remarks, «the better horseman will not so much reduce the forces of his horse, but rather stimulate them while keeping them under control». ⁴² Nevertheless, the rider of this horse is precariously balanced between tyranny and servitude since there is the imminent danger that she will either a) lose control and thus be enslaved to the anarchic whim of her diverse impulses, or b) oppressively tyrannise them, thus generally diminishing the capability of the subject taken as a whole – both of which would *minimise* her potential to experience the feeling of command and, *eo ipso*, achieve freedom. ⁴³

There are a number of methods that can be employed to prevent a drive, from tyrannising in this way. To list a few of these, in *D* 109 Nietzsche tells us that to unseat or *ostracise* a ‘vehement drive’ we could, for example, deprive the drive of satisfaction; or mentally associate its gratification with a painful thought; or even weaken ourselves as a whole (e.g. through fasting). He is keen to add, however, that it is not ‘we’ (understood as separate or above the drives) that desires and undertakes this regulation or ostracism, but merely another drive that is vying to gain ascendancy. Thus, if the strong, free (capable of agency) and agonistic self is to be maintained, the drive lusting for coordinated inner struggle, even if it usually lies dormant, must always be powerful enough to rise up, assert itself absolutely and thereby reinitiate the intrasubjective contest.

So, Nietzsche’s philosophy of the self and his conception of freedom as agency, *can* validly be classified ‘agonistic’ since it calls for a) the unification of the multifarious drives in a state of productive conflict; b) the need to legitimate the dominance of a ruling drive that can effect this unification; c) the cultivation of strength in the subordinate drives and, by dint of this, the striving for excellence and empowering self-transformation of the individual taken as a whole; d) it invites the risk of tyranny by promoting a struggle for power among the drives; and e) the creation of an underlying, totalising drive capable of ousting an overly tyrannical drive. Finally, one also finds that the potency of the free individual arises from the internal balancing of unity and plurality, and the containment of contradictory drives – a harmony in dissonance emblematic of the *agon*.

By Nietzsche’s model, assuming the self to be a pre-given and metaphysically free unity hinders the project of self-cultivation since people falsely and complacently believe that they already possess what must in fact be fought for through the unification of the drives. If a unity is to be properly established and upheld, then, the self must continually be conceived of as multiple. ⁴⁴ However, the seductive power of language, and the illusion of subject-substance petrified within it, is perpetually resisting this reconception. Since «we cannot change our means of [linguistic] expression at will» (*WP*, 625; *KSA* 13:14[122]), and these means of expression act as straitjacket upon our thought, it would appear there is a major linguistic barrier to our attainment of freedom: one will always be seduced into laziness (believing oneself to already be free and unified) whenever one speaks or even consciously thinks. Just as Nietzsche fears ‘we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar’ (*TI*, ‘Reason’ in *Philosophy*, 5), it seems we are unable to get rid of the fable of a *causa sui* subject-substance because it is ossified within the sign-system humankind requires to survive. ⁴⁵ This is not to say that Nietzschean freedom is therefore defunct; rather, there exist serious obstacles to its becoming enduring and widespread, ones that Nietzsche would undoubtedly want us to affirm and engage with.

⁴² Tongeren (2002), p. 21.

⁴³ See *WP*, 778; *KSA* 13:14[157].

⁴⁴ See Gemes (2009), p. 44.

⁴⁵ See also *GS*, 58.

3.3) Lyotard and the Development of the Will

To illustrate his refutation of autonomy and the metaphysically free will, Lyotard turns to the narrative practices of a South American people called the Cashinahua. When the Cashinahua narrator tells a story, he begins by saying: «I am going to tell you the story of X [here he inserts the name of the hero] as I have always heard it», and he ends by saying: «Here ends the story of X; it was told to you by Y [here he inserts his own name]» (*JG*, p. 32). Significantly, the storyteller does not disclose their name at the beginning – presenting themselves first as a narratee, a listener, and relay, and thus «not as autonomous (...) but, on the contrary, as heteronomous» (*ibid.*). The pole of the author is therefore treated as secondary to that of the addressee and the Cashinahua narrator does not pose as the spontaneous or uncaused author of the meaning of the discourse he speaks; rather, he «claims to belong to the tradition» (*JG*, p.33). Indeed, the original author of a Cashinahua narrative is, as with almost any folk tale, anonymous. Finally, having heard the story, the narratee is required to retell it since to refuse to do so «is a great abomination to [the Cashinahua]» (*JG*, p.35).

Lyotard implies that the Cashinahua narrative is a metonymic representation of the mechanics of all discourse and conscious human action: «as the content of the [Cashinahua] narratives makes abundantly clear (...), human beings are not the authors of what they tell, that is, of what they do, and that, in point of fact, *there never are authors*» (*JG*, p.36; my emphasis). For Lyotard, because we are always first addressees, we are *always* first obligated to speak and relay prescriptions – especially when we prescribe maxims to ourselves; thus, Lyotard holds that humans are first and foremost heteronomous.

Lyotard also explicitly takes issue with Kant's categorical imperative, which posits that we are ought to be self-legislative with respect to our moral maxims. Lyotard argues that this wrongly assumes the self that prescribes the law to be identical with the self that must obey that law – an illegitimate inference that presupposes a unified subject-substance (*TD*, p. 99). The problem, though, is that this is a myth, and these separate selves – one as addressor, one as addressee – are radically incommensurable and cannot be formed into a unified 'I'; moreover, as we have just seen, the prescribing self is itself first obliged to formulate its maxims, and so, for Lyotard, humans are always situated within a chain of heteronomous obligation.

For all of the above reasons, Lyotard states that «the will is never free and freedom does not come first» (*JG*, p. 35); however, immediately after this repudiation, he states, «that [one] may say something else later, granted; that then there is will, granted. But this will can be exercised only against the *backdrop* of obligation that comes first» (*ibid.*; my emphasis). The Cashinahua narrator, for example, is not a wholly passive conduit for tradition – indeed, the better storyteller is the one who embellishes and invents (*JG*, p.33). That humans are never autonomous authors does not «mean they have nothing to do. On the contrary they have a thousand things to do, and they must constantly match wits with the fate they [...] are constantly being given» (*JG*, p. 36).

Likewise, though Lyotard claims the identity of an individual is fragmented across different linguistic elements, this does not mean that our identity is pinned down; rather, he believes that one's «mobility in relation to these language games (...) is tolerable» (*PMC*, p. 15). Indeed, these linguistic structures, and the rules they dictate regarding what constitutes appropriate linkage, display a certain amount of malleability. For Lyotard, all discussions are battles, each of which has their own rules, yet, because these rules are necessarily immanent to the discourse in which they are situated (i.e. there are no metacriteria), «they allow and encourage the greatest possible flexibility of utterance» (*PMC*, p. 17). Individuals must constantly exploit this and invent new, unexpected moves to outwit their interlocutors. The new moves that individuals create within the parameters

of these flexible rules, Lyotard calls ‘innovations’. These improve the efficiency of the discourse and prevent stagnation – for example, artistic discourses continually need new and different artworks to discuss so that the vitality of the discourse can be maintained. Innovation is then distinguished from what Lyotard calls ‘paralogism’, which engenders moves that destabilise and bring into question the rules imposed by an existing linguistic structure.⁴⁶ To give a fitting example, Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, with its rhetorical style transgressed the boundaries of both the philosophical and artistic genres, thereby forcing a reassessment of exactly what rules define these discourses.

Due to their destabilising, dissentient, and often iconoclastic effect, paralogistic moves are frequently repressed by other players within the discourse. «Such behaviour», says Lyotard, «is terroristic» since it entails

... eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player from the language game one shares with him. He is silenced or consents, not because he has been refuted, but because his ability to participate has been threatened (*PMC*, pp.63–4).

This reactionary type of move attempts to homogenise individuals by making them conform to rigid criteria. As Haber highlights, it «demands that everyone speak in one voice» and is terroristic insofar as it tries to ‘delimit the unbounded nature of the self’.⁴⁷ The creation of new rules, games and genres by paralogy allows the subject to continually reposition itself within new linguistic structures, which, in turn, enables it to expand, fragment and express its protean nature without restriction. Indeed, Lyotard postulates that, despite the ‘backdrop’ of heteronomy, it is through this act of creating new moves, games and genres, «that something like the imagination, or the will (...) [can] develop» (*JG*, p. 61). Needless to say, then, Lyotard advocates paralogism over innovation since the effect of the former is not merely the improved performativity of a genre (although this may happen) but, rather, the resistance of terror.

All this perhaps misleadingly gives the impression that, for Lyotard, the human subject can use linguistic conventions as a mere framework for its various acts of free creativity. Anne Barron, however, shrewdly observes how Lyotard’s conception of paralogy and the will does not «speak of an essential freedom, or form of initiative that belongs to the individual. The possibility of a countermove is presupposed by the existence of a game».⁴⁸ Indeed, in Section Two it was found that, for Lyotard, individuals are possessed and determined by language («our intentions are tensions exerted by genres»). Far from being human acts of will, these paralogistic countermoves or linkages are merely the result of unexpected phrases triumphing in the linguistic struggle to concatenate. This then forces an existing genre to adapt its rules and assimilate the phrase, or, alternatively, it forces the emergence of a completely new genre which can assimilate the phrase. As one of Lyotard’s interviewers has remarked, by Lyotard’s model, humans appear to be mere «passive receptors, manipulated by language, listening to its voice without any possibility of influencing it» (*TWR*, p. 408); to be sure, Lyotard admits, «I don’t think I’m an actor or an agent» (*TWR*, p. 409). So, although he unequivocally rejects the idea of an uncaused free will, there is a conspicuous and unresolved tension within Lyotard’s philosophy: on the one hand he stresses that there is only a *backdrop* of obligation and beyond this there are things we, as individuals, must actively ‘do’; then, on the other, he completely rejects the notion of human agency, asserting that all we ‘do’ is passively actualise the victorious phrases in a battle fought between linguistic elements.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, despite this bind,

⁴⁶ See *PMC*, p.61. See also Readings (1992), p. 73.

⁴⁷ Haber (1994), p. 21.

⁴⁸ Barron (1992), p. 39.

⁴⁹ The linguistic conflict outlined in Section Two therefore promotes the creation of new provisional rules, ever stronger ‘moves’ and the transformation of genres. It is on these grounds that Emilia Steuerman deems

what can be discerned is that Lyotard's ideal self is 'free' in the sense of being an open structure and a site where new moves can come into existence, irrespective of whether one actively creates them or only passively actualises them. One is thus able to extrapolate that, for Lyotard, the free self is one that is free *from terror*.

Both Lyotard and Nietzsche reconceive of the self as a multiplicity, view the will as something to be developed and reject the idea of metaphysical freedom; however, only the latter's account of the self can validly be considered agonistic since only *it* affirms the need to unite this multiplicity. Conversely, Lyotard presents the will as something that must be employed to create new moves, rules and genres that destabilise and further fragment the linguistic structures across which the self is divided – an endeavour that resists all forms of totality by keeping this self unbounded and *disunited*. Once again, then, one bears witness to a profound imbalance (uncharacteristic of the *agon*) in Lyotard's philosophy since it valorises the disunity of the self without considering the fertility which can arise when one unifies in a way that *preserves* difference. Indeed, freedom, for Lyotard, is freedom from imposed unity, whereas, contrariwise, Nietzsche conceives of freedom (qua agency) as *emerging* from imposed unity. What shall now be examined is how Lyotard's and Nietzsche's 'political' thoughts can each be read as attempts to realise and safeguard their divergent conceptions of the free self.

4) Cultural Unity and Agonistic Politics

Both Lyotard and Nietzsche eschew the idea of producing rigid political blueprints since such dogmatism runs counter to their calls for self-creativity. With respect to Nietzsche, this absence of a concrete model for political praxis has led many critics to polemically insist that, ultimately, there is no coherent 'Nietzschean' political philosophy;⁵⁰ similarly, the lack of a 'Lyotardian' blueprint has provoked the frustration of some of his commentators.⁵¹ Nevertheless, both explicitly express politically orientated thoughts which directly relate to their respective 'theories' of freedom. I shall now attempt to defend two theses: first, that both their visions of the free self demand a degree of cultural unity and domination (irrespective of how much Lyotard wishes to debar this); and, second, that unlike Nietzsche's thoughts concerning the aristocratic form of social organisation, Lyotard's 'risk-averse' political theory bears more resemblance to misarchism than to the *agon*.

4.1) A Skeleton for Agency

At the end of Section Two it was stated that a secure linguistic framework or 'scaffold' was a prerequisite of human agency – a claim that can now be expanded upon. In *BGE* 19, Nietzsche clearly indicates that a crucial component of freedom is self-reflection: «'Freedom of the will' – (...) the multifaceted state of pleasure of one who commands (...). As such, he enjoys triumph over resistances, *but thinks to himself* that it was his will alone that truly overcame the resistance» (my emphasis). So, as was indicated in the previous section, if individuals are to become agents they must be capable of consciously thinking

Lyotard's model of language agonistic ([1992], pp. 111–2). Although these *are* points of convergence between his model and the *agon*, I would argue that they are insufficient to categorise his model 'agonistic'. Not only do the arguments of Section Two still stand, but, furthermore, paralogistic moves and the new rules they engender are not celebrated as ways of *taking* and expressing power so much as ways of *resisting* power. Correspondingly, their victory is not embraced because of the unifying role they play as new, stronger organisational rubrics (as one would expect if the model *were* properly agonistic) – quite the opposite, they are valued by Lyotard only as artifices that can be used to undermine stable unities.

⁵⁰ See e.g. Shaw (2007); and Hunt (1985).

⁵¹ See e.g. Browning (2000), p. 163; see also Maplas (2003), pp. 104–5.

about their actions both before they act (so that they have knowledge of the forthcoming act and affirm it as their own choice) and afterwards (so they can identify the act as both successful and as their own, thereby creating the affect of efficacious command). Since conscious thought occurs only within the strictures of language (*GS*, 354), a relatively stable, dominant sign-system *must* therefore be in place for the individual to experience their freedom as an agent.

What was also demonstrated in the preceding section was that one's ability to fulfil the promises one makes *to other humans* is a necessary condition of sovereign individuality. For this to be possible, says Nietzsche, the sovereign individual must be able to «think causally, (...) calculate, compute – and before he can do this, man himself will really have to become *reliable, regular, necessary*» (*GM*, II, 1). Nietzsche's emphasis on this need to be reliable *in the eyes of others*, coupled with the need for a stable and communally accepted sign-system, highlights the social bedrock in which freedom has its roots; indeed, Richard Schacht observes how, in order to become agents, we must first be initiated into a variety of established social practices, which allow us »to operate in terms of promises, agreements, rules [and] values«, and thus, «it is by means of the 'social straitjacket' that a degree of (...) mastery is first achieved». ⁵²

So, not only must there be a dominant and putatively fixed linguistic framework, but there must also be a degree of constancy to society itself. To be sure, Nietzsche directly associates the kind of self-stability and self-reflection needed for agency with the 'well-constructed' community (*BGE*, 19). To explicate this idea of sound social construction, it behoves us to examine Nietzsche's earlier thoughts concerning culture. 'Culture' – which the *OED* defines as «the distinctive ideas, customs, social behaviour, products, or way of life of a particular society»⁵³ – is made up of a conglomeration of diverse social practices. Nietzsche believes that the cultural diversity of a *true* culture must exhibit an '*internal coherence*' (*TP*, 33). Here one once again bears witness to Nietzsche's paradigmatic call for unification: «a culture has to be in all reality a single living unity» (*UM*, II, 4). According to Nietzsche, just as the individual possesses a multiplicity of heterogeneous drives, so does any community – drives for knowledge, happiness, territorial expansion, artistic excellence, and so on. Similar to his philosophy of the self, Nietzsche believed these drives, along with the social practices corresponding to them, needed to be kept in a state of vital proportion – i.e. be unified *in their diversity*. Nietzsche, indeed, commends the ancient Greeks for their '*unifying mastery*', which allowed them to achieve exactly this (*TP*, 46).

Yet Nietzsche does not think modern Occidental societies have achieved such cohesion. The vehement tyranny of the 'unlimited knowledge drive' has prohibited any form of cultural proportion. Additionally, though, he also holds that a genuine culture must exhibit *aesthetic* unity, that is, a «unity of artistic style in all the expressions of the life of the people». In opposition to this, however, he describes modern 'culture' as a 'motley' and «chaotic jumble of styles» (*UM*, I, 1). Nietzsche's wider argument seems to be that, due to the cultural instability and 'agitatedness' which gives rise to this disarray of styles and drives, individuals lack the firm social platform needed for agency; thus, «higher culture can no longer allow its fruits to mature» (*HH*, I, 285). So, if a community is to be fruitful and bear sovereign individuals, its cultural practices must be stable and unified.⁵⁴

⁵² Schacht (1983), p. 295. In emphasising the indispensability of this social platform it is also vital not to overlook how, in his account of the free individual, Nietzsche *also* emphasises the importance of a) being able to deconstruct and reshape these cultural practices, and b) being asocial, solitary or even antisocial (cf., *D*, 177, 323, 443, and 491).

⁵³ 'Culture, n.', in *OED*:

Online, <<http://oed.com/view/Entry/45746?rskey=kWUJSo&result=1&isAdvanced=false>> [accessed 5 August, 2011].

⁵⁴ See Warren (1991), pp. 46–55. Cf. *WP*, 677; *KSA* 12:7 [3].

The ancient Greek *agon* would appear to have endowed this kind of unity since disparate cultural practices were cohered under the common objectives of a) embodying the ideal of productive conflict, and b) working toward the wellbeing of the social whole. In his later work, however, Nietzsche steered away from the Hellenic manifestation of the *agon* (with its proximity to democratic forms of government) and began to propound what one might call ‘agonistic aristocracy’. Daniel Breazeale remarks how, according to Nietzsche, «[c]ultural unity is impossible apart from some sort of *mastery* (...). In order for culture to be possible at all there must be hierarchy, obedience, subordination, and subjugation.»⁵⁵ What Breazeale fails to note, however, is the shift in how Nietzsche conceives of this mastery: whereas in *Homer’s Contest* Nietzsche intimates that *any* citizen should rightfully be able to enter the agonistic contest to become a ‘master’, in his later work he conceives of agonistic competition as being restricted to a «master race, the future ‘masters of the earth’; – a new, tremendous aristocracy» (*WP*, 960; *KSA* 12:2[57]).

Nietzsche reasons that such a caste based separation is necessary because genuine human agency requires the ‘*pathos of distance*’ – i.e. the ruling caste must be stoically indifferent to the tribulations of the subservient caste, thus allowing them to view this inferior majority as tools to be commanded and exploited without humanitarian restraint.⁵⁶ The implicit argument here is that without such *obeying* tools one cannot fully claim to be an agent since one cannot feel the affect of *command* in the highest degree. Moreover, and what is crucial to our current study, this unimpeded ability to command provides the ruling caste with the means to organise the anarchy of society’s drives and unify culture under a dominant will.

The upshot of Nietzsche’s radical aristocracy is that «[m]utually refraining from injury, violence, and exploitation, placing your will on a par with the other’s» (*BGE*, 259), that is, the principles of the *agon*, are confined to the nobility. Indeed, Frederick Appel has even asserted that this radical aristocracy «is the meaning of the Nietzschean *agon*.»⁵⁷ This, however, is a grand claim – one that seems to downplay the democratic connotations of Nietzsche’s earlier writings concerning the *agon*.⁵⁸ Whether Nietzsche’s *agon* principally supports liberal democracy or radical aristocracy is a major debate for which there is not time to enter into here. But what *can* be seen is that, by Nietzsche’s agonistic aristocracy, only a select few individuals possess the sovereignty and freedom needed to act as *agents*, and, furthermore, that this privileged minority only attain and express their freedom by dominating, unifying and imposing their evaluative criteria on the diversity of cultural practices.

This call for a master race built upon an ethos of noble and fertile competition is reinforced by Nietzsche’s denouncement of what he calls ‘*misarchism*’: «the democratic idiosyncrasy of being against everything that dominates and wants to dominate» (*GM*, II, 12). Acampora argues that, rather than being a celebration of all (including sadistic) domination on Nietzsche’s part, this is more accurately interpreted as an admonishment of a particular species of domination. Since the democratic state cannot tolerate any risk to its founding belief in equality, it abhors and outlaws all forms of domination; yet this proscription is paradoxically enacted in a totalitarian manner. In this way, says Acampora, democracy is ‘risk-averse’ because «it cannot permit the most serious contest to its ideals.»⁵⁹

As Section One explained, the strength of the Hellenic *agon* paradoxically rests upon the totalising precept that there ought to be no totalising precepts; nevertheless, though this

⁵⁵ Breazeale (1999), p.xxiv.

⁵⁶ See *BGE*, 257; *AC*, 43; and *GM*, I, 2.

⁵⁷ Appel (1999), p. 140; cf. Dombovsky (2004), p.124.

⁵⁸ Connotations Hatab (1995) explores in his attempt to formulate a Nietzschean defence of democracy (see esp. pp. 78–93).

⁵⁹ Acampora (2003a), p. 380.

may appear, *prima facie*, like misarchism, it is not so. In the case of the *agon*, though people with tyrannical intent are ostracised if, upon victory, they attempt to establish a ‘*monopoly of preponderance*’, they and their totalitarian aspirations are readily admitting into the agonistic space. For Nietzsche, the *agon* thus permits contestation to its founding principles, while misarchism suppresses all such challenges. Thus, productive conflict and the freedom it engenders, as has been stressed throughout this study, perpetually teeters or, as Nietzsche might say, ‘dances’, on the edge of pre-Homeric tyranny. Indeed, Acampora contends that in praxis Nietzsche’s agonism would not be able to withstand this threat and, since it lacks stability, it is therefore ‘not viable for politics’.⁶⁰

It is misleading to assume that Nietzsche’s thoughts were, in the first place, intended as a ‘viable’ political model. Remedying culture was Nietzsche’s priority, and, he states, «that which is great in the cultural sense has been unpolitical, even *anti-political*» (*TI, What the Germans Lack*, 4) – he even describes himself as «the last anti-political German» (*EH, Why I am so Wise*, 3) The societal and individual drive for politics is, according to Nietzsche, caught in a zero-sum game with the antagonistic and more worthwhile drive for a strong unified culture.⁶¹ Thus, I would argue that Nietzsche’s politically orientated meditations should first and foremost be interpreted as a heuristic attempt to uncover the governmental preconditions of a *true, unified culture* – one that can act as a springboard for human agency. So, irrespective of whether the ancient Greek arrangement or radical aristocratism best embodies Nietzsche’s political perspective, it can certainly be claimed that he envisaged the healthy society as one constructed around the principle of productive contest. This section has additionally foregrounded two other fundamental points: first, freedom as agency – even if limited to a select minority – is only made possible by unifying culture and affirming the need for dominating politico-cultural forces that are able to impose this unity; and second, we must therefore embrace the danger of tyranny concomitant with the *agon* and strong rule if sovereign individuals are to be realised. Lyotard, however, arrives at some quite antithetical conclusions, as we shall now see.

4.2) Lyotard and the Ineluctability of Domination

What the previous section demonstrated was that if Lyotard’s vision of freedom – understood as the self’s unbounded freedom from terror – is to be made a social reality, then the drive for paralogy needs to be able to express itself without restraint. In *TD*, Lyotard explains that every wrong that is incurred when a differend is decided over «ought to be able to be put into phrases» (*TD*, p. 13). So, every time a dispute arises between two parties for which there is no criteria that can justly be applied to both, the creation of new idioms and rules for linkage must be permitted so that the differend can be witnessed and the terroristic silencing of one party can be avoided. Since there is no pre-existing metacriteria available to judge between differends – that is, there is no transcendent, fixed or *justifiably* dominant definition of what ‘justice’ means – Lyotard’s ideal judge, like Aristotle’s, must seemingly adjudicate without pre-given criteria. It is the affirmation of this absence of ‘God-given’ measure that characterises Lyotard’s ‘paganism’: «when I say ‘pagan’, I mean godless. And the reason we (...) need to be taught a lesson is that we still want justice. That is the point of my instructive story: justice in a godless society» (*LP*, p. 123).

Each genre, language game and, to be sure, every different culture holds ‘justice’ to signify something different, and with no transcendent measure they would all appear to be equally valid. Lyotard thus holds that there is, and should remain, a pluralistic ‘multiplicity of justices’ (*JG*, p.100). The ideal pagan would therefore never try to impose one standard

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 388.

⁶¹ See also *D*, 179.

of justice. To dominate in such a fashion is, for Lyotard, to try to unify the totality of individuals under one set of criteria – to forcibly homogenise the heterogeneity of subjects, to stifle difference and invention, and, in so doing, to terroristically circumscribe the self. Honneth observes how this idea of a multiplicity of justices «anticipates a social condition in which all social forms of life enjoy the same right to autonomy and to the unimpeded development of their creativity», and, he continues, «the same thought is presented as a postulate of the egalitarian free-play of cultural difference»⁶² – a stance clearly opposed to that of Nietzsche.

There are, however, as Nietzsche has already brought to our attention, dangers involved with such a radical repudiation of transcendent models of justice; indeed, Lyotard's imagined interlocutor in LP points out that in doing so «you throw the door wide open to tyranny» (LP, p. 135). The 'multiplicity of justices' espoused by Lyotard brings with it the danger of totalitarianism because, under it, one must accept even a tyrannical conception of justice as one equally valid formulation amongst others in the pagan multiplicity. Lyotard accordingly admits that 'one does risk falling back into a sort of indifferentism that is the bad side of [paganism] (*JG*, p. 96). Moreover, one must grant legitimacy to the prevailing understanding of justice within one's own culture – that is, one must accept rule by convention since there is no other way of deciding what type of rule is just. Lyotard warns us, however, that «rule by convention would require that one accept, let's get to the bottom of things right away, even Nazism. After all, since there was near unanimity upon it, *from where could one judge that it was not just?*» (*JG*, p. 74; my emphasis). The unregulated affirmation of difference which characterises radical paganism therefore seems to counterproductively facilitate its own collapse into pre-Homeric tyranny.

Unlike Nietzsche, however, Lyotard is unwilling to tolerate the threat of totalitarianism. Lyotard wants to promote a conception of justice that can sustain diversity and disunity while simultaneously supplying a ground from which terroristic cultures and cultural practices can be legitimately attacked. To do so, Lyotard appropriates Kant's theory of the Idea: «a necessary concept of reason to which no corresponding object can be given in sense-experience».⁶³ An Idea is formed when we take a concept of the understanding for which we do have intuitions, for example the concept 'human', and we use reason to expand it so that it incorporates all possible instances of this object, thereby forming an Idea – for example, the Idea 'humanity', for which there can be no intuition since we can never experience the totality of human beings. In Lyotard's eyes, this Idea of the social totality plays a regulative role with respect to moral action. This is because in Kant's account of the categorical imperative one must have an Idea of this social whole in order to be able to determine what effect one's maxim would have if it became universal law for this totality.⁶⁴ A just action would then be one that is in accordance with a law under which humanity could *potentially* be unified. Nonetheless, since one can never have an intuition of this totality, this Idea is *not* «an empirical totality, but a practical totality (...); it is a sort of horizon that performs a regulatory role with respects to action» (*JG*, p. 46).

Lyotard suggests that this regulatory Idea should be transformed for the purposes of postmodernism: «it is no longer a matter, for us, of reflecting upon what is just or unjust against the horizon of a social totality, but, on the contrary, against the horizon of a multiplicity or of a diversity» (*JG*, p. 87). Thus, a prescription, action, political institution or local conception of justice that respects multiplicity and cultural diversity would then rightfully be considered just. Conversely, 'absolute injustice' can be defined as «that which prohibits that the question of the just and the unjust be, and remain, raised» (*JG*, p. 67) – i.e. anything that suffocates difference and the multiplicity of justices.

⁶² Honneth (1985), p. 154.

⁶³ Kant (2007), A 327.

⁶⁴ See Kant (1997), 4:402.

Liotard conceives of this ‘justice of multiplicity’ as an aegis under which the pagan multiplicity of justices can be protected from terror. At a specifically linguistic level, though, «the Idea of justice will consist in preserving the purity of each game, that is, for example, in insuring that the discourse of truth be considered as a ‘specific’ language game, that narration be played by its ‘specific’ rules» (*JG*, p. 96). This conservation of heterogeneity is meant to foreclose the terroristic unity that an imperialistic game or genre tries to impose across the entirety of discursive and cultural practices by subjecting them to *its* evaluative criteria. In trying to block the struggle *between* heterogeneous games or genres, Lyotard hopes that the dominance of a single set of rules can be prevented and the creative struggle to invent new rules that takes place immanently, *within* these linguistic elements, can be secured.

In this way, Lyotard implies that a just system of political governance would ensure that a diversity of discursive and cultural practices is maintained, one in which rules and valuations are produced immanently through conflict between participants, *not* imposed from without. This does raise a variety of issues regarding the pragmatics of such a politics – could a society really be organised and governed solely according to the principle of multiplicity? Indeed, on this issue Lyotard admits ignorance: «here I must say I don’t know» (*JG*, p. 94).

Although one must bear these practical questions in mind, it is the contradiction at the heart of Lyotard’s notion of justice with which I am here concerned. Lyotard’s vision of a society free from any evaluative criteria that have pretensions of universality exhibits a performative contradiction because

It is assured, paradoxically enough, by a prescriptive of universal value. It *prescribes* the observance of the singular justice of each game [...]. It *authorises* the “violence” that accompanies the work of the imagination [in creating new rules]. It *prohibits* terror (*JG*, p.100; my emphasis).

The first problem is stark: the pagan multiplicity of justices is, as Bennington tersely highlights, «only made possible by the justice of multiplicity which it must condemn as totalising.»⁶⁵ Moreover, the absolute purity and diversity of which Lyotard speaks is foreclosed by the logic of Lyotard’s proposals. This is because Lyotard’s justice of multiplicity, which must be classified as a representative of the prescriptive game, can only attempt to maintain the purity of games by evaluating, judging and regulating them all according to *its* criteria for measurement. The prescriptive game and Lyotard’s own metajustice thereby dominates, infiltrates and comprises the purity and sovereignty of all these games along with the multiplicity of local justices it adjudicates over. Finally, insofar as Lyotard’s justice of multiplicity does this, it inadvertently unifies these disparate elements under one criterion – contradictorily, the criterion of disunity and diversity. Indeed, Lyotard is universally *prescribing*, *authorising* and *proscribing*; as Thébaud trenchantly informs him: «[h]ere you are talking like the great prescriber himself (ibid) – a comment which, after eliciting laughter from both dialogists, brings the text to a close. Nevertheless, there is something *unheimlich* about this laughter: unification and domination are actions, which have, as Freud might say, ‘undergone repression and then returned from it».⁶⁶ Certainly, what *JG* reveals is that domination is in fact ineradicable. Unable to tolerate the risk of tyranny entailed by his radical paganism, Lyotard’s futile attempt to proscribe hegemony and imposed unity inevitably means, reproducing precisely what it is being proscribed.⁶⁷ Thus, domination and cultural unity are necessary conditions not only for Nietzsche’s conception of freedom as agency, but also for Lyotard’s postmodern understanding of freedom as the self’s freedom from terror.

⁶⁵ Bennington (1984), p. 69.

⁶⁶ Freud (1955), p. 245.

⁶⁷ A. Weber (1985), p. 113.

In Section Two, we saw how, for Lyotard, different genres and cultural domains try to regulate, overpower and dominate one another. Lyotard maintains that minimising this kind of encroachment (by ensuring heterogeneous domains retain their purity) will prevent the terror of imposed unity and reified conceptions of the self. This in turn, he thinks, will grant individuals a greater opportunity to compete against one another (or, we should say, to passively actualise the competition between linguistic elements) *within* these distinct cultural spheres, to create new paralogistic moves, new rules and genres, to develop their will and further fragment their unbounded selves. However, he wishes to pacify the arguably more prominent, overarching conflict that takes place *between* these supposedly heterogeneous contests – a conflict that arises as individuals, groups, genres and specific cultural domains vie to forcibly unify culture under a single will, stake and measure. Whereas Nietzsche embraces this grand conflict and the cultural unity inflicted by its impermanent victor (so long as it does not persevere to the point of stagnation), Lyotard aims toward completely extinguishing it by isolating the warring parties; and so, in light of this, I would argue that Lyotard's wider political thought cannot justifiably be called agonistic.

Sam Weber, one of the few to have critically compared Lyotard's 'agonistics' against HC, suggests that, whereas there is a «*tension* between unity and disunity» present in Nietzsche's account of the *agon*, Lyotard «proscrib[es] this ambivalence in the name of purity and singularity of each game» and therefore his political thought cannot be labelled agonistic in any Nietzschean sense of the term.⁶⁸ It should be noted, though, as we have just seen above, that there *is* such a tension in Lyotard's account of justice. However, the crucial difference is that this tension is not based on a conscious affirmation of unity and a deliberate attempt to balance it against disunity (as Nietzsche's is). Instead, since Lyotard cannot tolerate even the threat of tyranny, he endeavours, as Weber highlights, to completely proscribe cultural harmony in favour of dissonance and disgregation. Consequently, the tension that *does* then inevitably resurfaces, is unintentional and, in its normative bent, unbalanced (massively favouring disunity and trying to repress unity). To be sure, Lyotard's political thought is, in actuality, markedly *misarchistic*: it dominates totally by railing «against everything that dominates and wants to dominate», and, unlike the genuinely agonistic arrangement, is unashamedly 'risk-averse'.

Concluding Remarks: (R)evaluating Misarchism

One of the primary objectives of this paper was to bring into relief the points of convergence and divergence between Nietzsche's and Lyotard's attitudes toward conflict. Having traced the continuity to be found in their philosophies of the self, and eventuates in their political thought, I have argued that one bears witness to two opposed paradigms: with Nietzsche one uncovers a profound emphasis – one representative of the *agon* – on the need for poise and the tolerance of danger; contrariwise, throughout Lyotard's advocacy of conflict one finds a sustained repression of cultural unity and domination. I have accordingly contended that it is misrepresentative to label Lyotard's philosophy 'agonistic' if we are to understand this term in its Nietzschean context (as his ambiguous citation of HC in *PMC* seemingly encourages us to).

Certainly, Lyotard has striven to transport the signifier 'agonistic' from what he would likely consider to be Nietzsche's overly fascistic philosophy, and reinscribe it within his own postmodern discourse – reinterpreting it as denoting *any struggle that resists domination and stable unity*. However, even when analysed in isolation, Lyotard's idiosyncratic 'theory' of 'agonistics' has revealed itself to be intrinsically problematic: combative social relations are promoted as a means of inhibiting universal legislation and

⁶⁸ Weber (1985), p. 113.

hegemony, yet this society is only insured by his hypocritically universal and domineering justice of multiplicity. On this point, it may pay to heed the warnings of Zarathustra: «Mistrust all those who speak much of their justice! (...) do not forget that all they lack to be pharisees is – power!» (Z, II, *On the Tarantulas*).

Though this attack on the partisans of equality is perhaps a little too dramatic to be wholly directed at Lyotard, it underscores the fact that, even with people or theories that appear vehemently opposed to totalitarianism, one must be wary of the ever-present will to domination.

Supremacy and coerced unity are indelible features of the world in which we live. Indeed, from a Nietzschean viewpoint, Lyotard could be said to «*thereby [affirm] another world* than that of life, nature, and history; and insofar as [he] affirm[s] this ‘other world’, must [he] not by the same token deny its counterpart, this world, *our world*» (GS, 344). Hence, one could view Lyotard as practicing incomplete nihilism, where, although one does away with worn out religious valuations and replaces them with new ones, as Heidegger tells us, one «still posits the latter always in the old position of authority.»⁶⁹ Lyotard conceives of a godless pagan society, yet the doctrinaire values he formulates in God’s wake are just as idealistic and ‘other worldly’ as those they supplant – as Murphy rightly states, «Nietzsche would probably find Lyotard too liberal, too Christian.»⁷⁰ However, by way of postscript, we should briefly consider whether Lyotard’s postmodern misarchism might not still play a role of positive value within the Nietzschean framework.

It is in an aphorism entitled *Ennoblement through degeneration* (HH, I, 224), that one uncovers a potential a place for Lyotard’s misarchism. Here Nietzsche states that the danger facing any ‘strong community’ – i.e. one founded on «firm-charactered individuals» – «is that of gradually increasing inherited stupidity such as haunts stability like a shadow». Nietzsche proposes that, when a destabilising injury is inflicted upon this increasingly inflexible society, it can effect a ‘loosening up’. Since society then has to adapt around this injury, the «whole body is as it were *inoculated* with something new»; thus, whilst «the strongest natures *preserve* the type, the weaker help it to *evolve*».

Although Nietzsche advocates continual revaluation and self-creation in tandem with a dynamic form of cultural unity, it is very easy to see how his promotion of regularity and reliability as features of the strong willed, sovereign individual invites exactly the kind of social paralysis he so often scorns. As we have also seen, the agonistic arrangement has a proclivity toward tyranny. In both cases the cohesion of culture can stagnate. Analogously, one could imagine a wrestling contest that has lost its fluidity since one wrestler has caught the other in a stable, strong and unrelenting hold. In situations such as these, intervention and separation is needed to ‘loosen up’ this static unity; and with this in mind the referee breaks the contestants apart.

This is how I suggest we ought to think of Lyotard’s misarchism – as a dominating force that can temporarily allow different cultures and cultural practices respite from oppressive criteria such as, currently, for example, that of capitalist economics. Nonetheless, this drive for misarchism is not a transcendent judge – it is merely another contestant who, in their lust to rule, has assumed the role of umpire. Though perhaps temporarily weakening or injurious to society, a politics and zeitgeist dominated by postmodern misarchism – that is, by a respect for difference and resistance to hegemony – could, therefore, fulfil a valuable function. It would serve a purpose similar to that of ostracism (whilst remaining more applicable to contemporary politics), creating an environment ripe for fresh agonistic contest and the evolution of new, vigorous unities. Thus, since opportunities for experiencing the affect of command are maximised in an *enlivened* agonistic arena of this sort, a temporary Lyotardian ‘freedom from imposed unity’ (except that imposed by the

⁶⁹ Heidegger (1977), p. 69.

⁷⁰ Murphy (2001), p. 176.

separating force) could in fact clear the way for a Nietzschean ‘freedom as agency’. Nonetheless, if the neutering and degeneration of culture is to be avoided, misarchism would have to remain only a short-term, regulative moment in the evolutionary cycle of a community; however, because of its inherently risk-averse character, creating ways of ensuring this would, doubtless, be a complex task.

This is but a mere adumbration of how one might begin to productively synthesise or, rather, *balance* together, certain aspects of Lyotard and Nietzsche – one that raises questions and resistances that exceed the bounds of this study. Within these bounds, though, what has been illumined is the challenge that faces contemporary theorists of culture, politics and society more generally – namely, that of finding novel and relevant ways to think about and realise human freedom (e.g. by overcoming the linguistic obstacles to agency or ensuring the provisionality of misarchism), ways that actively mobilise and manage domination and unity to society’s advantage.

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