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The Inhuman

Veronica Vasterling

In *The Inhuman* (1991) and *Postmodern Fables* (1997) Jean-François Lyotard outlines an anthropology of the inhuman that takes its cues from psychoanalytical theory and Kant's notion of the sublime. Starting from the standard observation that humans are not born human as, for instance, cats are born cats, Lyotard relates the inhuman to infancy (Lyotard 1991, 3). Infants lack language, common reason, locomotion, in short, they lack almost everything that is considered to be typically or essentially human. In contrast to humanist anthropology, Lyotard maintains that the initial inhumanness persists in adulthood as an irreconcilable remainder that haunts and agitates the soul.

The import of Lyotard's anthropology of the inhuman is not simply its critique of anthropocentric humanism. Critique of the latter is a common goal of poststructuralist philosophers and new materialists like Karen Barad (2012). Lyotard's critique stands out from the others in that it reflects on the point of view of the one who does the criticizing. His anthropology decenters the human point of view but also acknowledges that critique always involves a human point of view. Instead of eclipsing the human viewpoint, Lyotard's critique, therefore, attempts to account for the critical potential of a decentered human perspective.

68 In the history of Western philosophy, from Aristotle onwards, the initial inhumanness of human life has been interpreted in two ways. It has been understood either as a potentiality that will develop into human maturity, or as a first nature that is compensated by a second acquired nature, also known as culture. This teleological view persists to this day, both in the sciences and in common sense understandings of human nature. Criticizing the essentialism inherent in developmental models, which take humanness as their *telos*, twentieth-century continental philosophy has provided a dialectical-hermeneutical reinterpretation of the teleological view of human nature. The re-interpretation emphasizes, in Jean-Paul Sartre's famous formula, that existence precedes essence (Sartre 2007). Sartre's existentialist account of the human is reworked in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of the human body-subject. Despite its non-essentialist character, the anthropology of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty does not constitute a break with humanist tradition. As Lyotard points out, essentialist and non-essentialist anthropologies are humanist in that the heterogeneity of the inhuman and human is reconciled and unified without leaving any remainder. The seemingly innocent unification of all human beings under the cloak of humanism hides the violent exclusion of many in the name of the fully human. The unifying gesture of humanism neutralizes and totalizes, transforming contingent heterogeneity into a (supposedly) meaningful whole, thereby opening the door to the closed systems of totalitarianism to be witnessed in modern European history and beyond. Humanism, moreover, was and is an important source of the "grand narratives" of modernity, the utopian blueprints for a better future that invariably end in hell, epitomized by Auschwitz and the Gulag in the last century, and perhaps by the expanding war and chaos of the Middle East in the present century.

Lyotard details the humanist character of Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic ontology of the flesh as "a congruence of mind and things" (Lyotard 1991, 11), suggesting the attunement of human

flesh and flesh of the **world**. In contrast to Merleau-Ponty (1995), he emphasizes the ambivalence of **sensibility**, drawing attention to the disruptive openness of the human-world relation. Whereas sensibility, in Merleau-Ponty, enables the attunement of body and environment, sensibility in Lyotard is primarily affectability. A sentient body is an **affectable** body in the sense of non-intentional, heteronomous, and vulnerable openness to the world. Sensibility in the sense of affectability implies the possibility of becoming overwhelmed by what affects us. Lyotard's elaboration of sensibility in terms of affectability is inspired by Immanuel Kant's exposition of the sublime in *The Critique of Judgment*.

Kant describes the sublime as, "the absolutely great," as that which is in every respect and "beyond every comparison great" (1974, 91). Perceiving the overpowering greatness of nature gives rise to contradictory feelings. According to Kant, the reason of this ambivalence is that we are capable of an idea but not of a representation of the absolute. On the one hand, perception of something sublime gives rise to a feeling of pain because the faculty of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) is incapable of rendering a representation (*Darstellung*) of the sublime. On the other hand, it also arouses a feeling of pleasure because the sublime reminds us of the limitless power of the faculty of ideas (*Vernunft*). Incapable of providing a representation of the absolute (the sublime), we are nevertheless capable of thinking the absolute, of having an idea of the absolute. In its humanist reading, the experience of the Kantian sublime is emblematic of human nature that compensates finite sensibility with infinite reason. In Lyotard's reading, the experience of the Kantian sublime is exemplary for the irreducible heterogeneity of human faculties, entailing a reconsideration of these faculties. Thought is no longer the faculty that overcomes or compensates the finiteness of the senses, of embodiment in general. What the senses – in collaboration with imagination – fail to grasp or conceive is not recuperated in thought but rather registered as an irrecoverable,

70 inarticulate feeling which precisely for that reason incites us to think. The failure of the senses and imagination attests to the fact that the body is not necessarily attuned to what affects it. On a more primordial level sensibility is affectability to the point of violation:

Sensation makes a break in an inert nonexistence What we call life proceeds from a violence exerted from the outside on a lethargy. The *anima* exists only as forced. The *ais-theton* tears the inanimate from the limbo in which it inexists, it pierces its vacuity with its thunderbolt, it makes a soul emerge out of it. (Lyotard 1997, 243)

Instead of a body-subject in tune with the world, Lyotard's anthropology of the inhuman foregrounds a body-soul whose openness to excesses of affection is unmasterable. The excess of affection causes a breakdown of the capacity to process and articulate what affects me. The effect of unmasterable affectability is comparable to what Sigmund Freud calls "primary repression" (*Urverdrängung*; 1960). Something has happened, but the event is not and cannot be processed and integrated in the framework of **experience**. The feeling of pain and confusion evoked by the event is repressed and its cause – the event – remains unknown because it never became part of one's knowledge or experience in the first place. But what is repressed returns to haunt us: the soul remains hostage to the irrecoverable and inarticulate feelings evoked by the excess of affection. According to Lyotard it is "the task of writing, thinking, literature, arts, to venture to bear witness" (1991, 7) to this anguish of the soul. Haunted by the "sublime breakdowns" resulting from an excess of affection, the soul gives rise to "true thought": "If you think you're describing thought when you describe a selecting and tabulating of data, you're silencing truth.... Thinking, like writing or painting, is almost no more than letting a giveable come towards you." (18)

The unmasterable openness and affectability of infancy is the inhuman that inhabits humankind. Lyotard's anthropology of the inhuman replaces humanism's harmonious ontology of a body-subject whose existence is co-extensive with, and attuned to the world with the ontological heterogeneity and finiteness of a body-soul forced into life by a violently affecting exteriority. Inhabiting humankind as an unmasterable openness and affectability, the inhuman provides the conditions of reflective critique. True, that is, critical thought and art is not taking and defending a point of view, it is bearing witness to what emerges in one's view. In "letting a giveable come towards you," thought and art require patient irresoluteness, waiting till "what doesn't yet exist, a word, a phrase, will emerge" (19).

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