

## **Endurance and the Profession**

Jean-François Lyotard; Christophe Gallier; Steven Ungar; Barbara Johnson  
*Yale French Studies*, No. 63, The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre. (1982), pp. 72-77.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0044-0078%281982%290%3A63%3C72%3AEATP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-H>

*Yale French Studies* is currently published by Yale University Press.

### **JEAN-FRANCOIS LYOTARD** *Endurance and the Profession*

It has become an enviable rarity these days to obtain a salary in exchange for the kind of discourse that is commonly called philosophy. As the twentieth century draws to a close, the statesmen and families who run the French secondary school system seem to want to have nothing to do with it. For according to the spirit of the times, which is theirs, to do is to produce; that is, to reproduce with a surplus value. Those who teach philosophy are thus condemned to decimation or worse, while those who have studied it remain unemployed or give themselves up as hostages to other professions. Here, we will turn our attention to a minor but unexpected consequence: despite the adverse pressures in the socio-professional context, and at a time when the Philosophy Department at Vincennes (University of Paris VII) has been stripped of its right to grant those degrees and research diplomas that it is a University Department's duty to issue, the rate of attendance in philosophy courses has, little by little, been on the rise.

Why do they come? One day you asked this question solemnly during class. They told you it was their business, not yours.

A public institution of higher learning is by law an organ by which a nation insures the education of its children. The State is the guardian of such institutions. When the State removes all credibility from the Department of Philosophy at Vincennes, one expects it to die out. But the nation's children - grown-up children at that, and even foreigners - persist in attending the courses in large numbers. Would you conclude that the mere existence of this Department refutes the ideas of the State and of its educational guardians?

You enter; they are waiting for you. You have nothing in particular, nothing set to say, which is the general condition of philosophical discourse. But here, in addition, you have no long or short-range aim set by an institutional function (to prepare degrees, monitor competitions, follow programs and syllabi, and keep track of things through examinations). There you are, given over to indeterminate requirements. (Generally a few readings ahead of them, but in any case readings done with the frightful and shameful disorder of the philosopher.)

Does that mean that each teacher in your Department speaks of what he or she likes? No, it means that no one is protected, and above all in his or her own eyes, by prescribed rules. And everyone must give his or her name to what he or she says, without pleading necessity; and everyone, like a stutterer, must head towards what he or she wants in order to say it. -You're exaggerating. -Don't forget they wait for you every week, and without telling you what they're expecting. -All the same, you know what you are driving at . . . -For the day's session, yes, very precisely: for example, demonstrating the machinery of an "antistrephon" put in the mouth of Protagoras by Diogenes Laertes. -So, you really did have an idea in the back of your mind!

Is it an idea, this strength or weakness which, from year to year, makes you believe that with the analysis of this or that fragment of Diels and Kranz, and with many others like it, some in the discernable framework of the week's thought, others at the horizon, for later on, two months, a semester from now, eventually you'll succeed?

-Succeed at what? At holding on for another year? -It's not to be laughed at. You're in free-fall in the atmosphere and it's a matter of not landing too hard. So you're crafty, you stall. So, this slow-down, due to an institutional void, which is the opposite of the feverishness experienced by a teacher anxious to cover coursework in a limited time, creates or presupposes a soft and gentle "tempo." -That of research? -No, you've known researchers in the exact sciences. Their rhythm is one of athletic, economic, bureaucratic competition. More like the rhythm of study. But not of studies. Studies are something you work at, you pursue. In these classes, study goes along in its own way. You announce that you will study Thucydides, and three years later you still haven't begun.

-But yet, you, too, want something. -When one was younger, one might have wanted to please, or help, or lead by argument or revelation. Now, it's all over. You no longer know exactly what's wanted. How can you make others understand what you haven't really understood? But when the course works out well, you also know that since you made them understand what you didn't, it didn't really work out. The anguish, when you enter the classroom, especially at the beginning of the year, is not the stage fright of the actor or the orator (although it can be), the feeling of claustrophobia (all of us will burn in here), or the predicament of not knowing everything (rather reassuring). It is **the sovereign pressure of an imbecilic "You must go there," which does not say where.**

Just two years ago, this or that leftist commando was bursting in, denouncing the magisterial function, the star-system, alienation, apathy, cutting the electricity, raising his clubs, locking up the teacher awhile, and abusing the students. In their eyes, our palaver, our readings, our reffinements [Translators' note: The misspelling is present in the French text, (*raffinement*) as a comment on the notion] are gimmicks at best, and at worst treasons; for them, it's a state of war, an emergency. To ponder a metalepsis in the narration of Book 9 of *The Laws* is not futile, it's criminal. They know where to go.

We used to fight a bit. Only once did it lead to something worthwhile. It was on the day of an active strike. What could we do? At the time we were working on the operators in persuasive discourse, making use of Plato's dialogues and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and *Sophistic Refutation*. We subjected the statements relative to the strike to the same analysis. Once again we were speaking of Platonic pragmatics. Enter the commando unit armed with clubs, shouting that we were breaking the strike-a fight starts, quickly followed by palavers between the two groups, the besiegers and the besieged. The latter argue as follows: on the one hand, our "normal" activity is to study persuasive discourse, especially political discourse. On the other hand, to participate in an active strike is to occupy the workplace and to think together about the discourses which persuade or dissuade us from striking. The difference between these two activities is not distinguishable. You demand that it be, and you think it could be if we used certain words (*exploitation, alienation . . .*), a certain syntax ("it is not by chance that . . ."), certain names (*Marx. . .*). Question: In your eyes how many "Marxes" per sentence would it take for our discourse to become one of active strikers? Most of the assailants backed off, admitting that we were as much "out of it" as they were.

The rhythm of work in progress seems tentative and peaceful. But on the occasion of each of these pointless classes, it becomes asceticism, impatience, and fear. You get up well

before dawn and tell yourself: this particular part of the current work has to be done for tonight. For example: express the temporal logic of Protagoras' antistrephon before midnight. Because the day after tomorrow, you must explain it to those who are waiting for you. By looking straight at them, and not at your notes. And, as you aren't protected by an institution, make them furthermore understand that it's opportune or bearable to speak about such things.

So you sit down at your desk, and nothing has ever assured you that, by midnight, you will have understood. What if you didn't understand? Or what if it were to take longer than anticipated? What if you were extremely tired? Or what if you entertained the idea that, after all, the antistrephon of Protagoras or another, who gives a damn? Or else, what if you got your hands on a good Italian or American article supplying the interpretation you had imagined yourself giving?

In this last case, you're happy, you'll be able to do your course with this article. But at the same time, you're annoyed: there's something you have received and transmitted without transformation, without being transformed by it. This isn't work. You put it off till next week. What are you thus putting off? Confrontation, challenge and the judgment of God. This is why you can wade through the antistrepha; I mean, dabble around them for six months. Audiences are surprising.

Sometimes you allow yourself to think that your working notes keep accumulating, you're making progress. But, with age, you know the opposite is true, that you hoard waste, scraps, that the thing to be thought slips away from you, as in interminable evasions and metastases.

As for making this mortification the substance of what you have to say, this seems henceforth a paltry resource. For such a solution proceeds only from your memory, allowing you to compare what you wanted to obtain with what you hold, and not from your imagination which is indifferent to your grasp of anything. Moreover, here, amnesia rules. So much so that it's not even true that anything "slips away." Don't be satisfied with this shoddy pessimism. There's nothing to compare.

A few books are written this way out of the weekly rumination. There was a horizon sketched, uncertain. You've made headway here and there for two, three, four years. Sometimes bits of analyses are already published as articles. Nevertheless, you collect all of those attempts and you publish them as a book. Producing such a book means only one thing: that you're fed up with this approach, this horizon, this tone, these readings. Of course, the notes and even the parts already written don't exempt you from writing the book; that is, from re-thinking almost everything. But you do so to get it over with. What makes you happy, the sense of well-being you have with the book, is that you'll be done with the work. Whereas teaching is as endless as study itself.

But in order to finish and thus write the book, you must reach a certain satisfaction with what you thought, or believed you thought. And this is so to speak a grace momentarily granted, and you're truly unfortunate if you don't jump to exploit it. But also unfortunate if it stays with you.

The media have the truly unintelligible habit of making you speak about your latest book. How do you convince the mediators that, obviously, you wrote it to be done with it, and that once done, it is really finished? They believe it is false modesty. And they say they're doing you a favor. You become proud, you forget about this sort of publicity, you rely on another kind of distribution, osmosis or capillary action. After a little while, you no longer have a choice.

You aren't cut out for thinking; you're a philosopher. You believe it's not natural to think. You're envious of-but after all you disdain-your colleagues and friends who work in the human sciences, who seem to be in symbiosis with their work, who have a corpus, a method, a bibliography, a strategy, exchanges. That's what makes you different even from those close to you, like historians of philosophy, whom you admire nonetheless. You like what is unfinished. Nothing of what you write will be authoritative. You lend yourself willingly to this prescription: "to go there, without knowing where." You're certain that nobody can do it, least of all yourself. You know you're doing what you're not cut out to do. You're an impostor. You hate all this. Little by little you cease to draw any vanity from it. And this Department at Vincennes, if it's pleasant, it's because its total lack of aims and imposed aims lends itself to surprisingly few bursts of vanity: impostors cannot be convicted here, the mask holds, and so does honor. You don't edit a journal, you're not a school.

The media and the worldly wise smile in vain at your humility, insinuating that many paths lead to importance, and that to vegetate in your prefab bungalow in "the sticks" is one way to acquire it-but you know this isn't true. In better established professorships you become tempted to say what should be thought. Here, in Vincennes, this infatuation is not protected.

This doesn't at all prevent this pitiful state of affairs from trading on its misery and catching the eye of a few cynics. You fight it, eliminating from your discourse most connotations, making yourself, if possible, even more temperate and meticulous. For example, you give up the metaphysical euphoria of energies and convert to logic, especially that of prescriptives, severe and fastidious. Now, this dissuades a few cynics from staying, but not the most cynical.

-They would have a certain function in your economy, as long as they also force you incessantly to take a new line. And after all, how do you know what their cynicism is all about?

Taking a new line: the metaphor is reassuring. What is behind you isn't more certain than what you are facing; in fact, it's more uncertain. To go beyond is an idea that makes you smile. What has been studied energetically for a year, two years, ten years, you've let lie fallow. Study doesn't order; it disorders. They tell you to keep your cool.

Which you wouldn't be doing if you believed that what you have to do is name the unnamable, say the unsayable, conceive the unconceivable, pronounce the unpronounceable, or decide the undecidable-and that this is what it means to philosophize. You leave these poses to others.

Of course, you speak of what you don't comprehend. But it doesn't necessarily follow that it's incomprehensible. You read and give your course to see if others might have understood, by chance. The idea of a mission fades away.

They ask questions. So sometimes questions are posed, and sometimes people are only posing as they question. You're caught between your duty to listen and be patient, and your right to impatience. Others write to you, point to references, share thoughts-and question. A few are or will be your mentors.

You try for two kinds of understanding: first, that which permits you tomorrow, to situate the antistrophe of Protagoras within the writing of temporal logic. A strong understanding, and ultimately useless. The other is totally different: to learn obscurely, after months, years of study, why this bizarre verbal argument interested you. You first included it within a general examination of ruse, for example, and that had attracted you because you saw it as a weapon against the powerful. We're weak, you used to say as a justification. All this seemed directed

toward some political end; you were inspecting the available arsenal. You easily refuted those who judged you as too picky, too slow in moving on towards action. You compared the funeral oration of Overney by Geismar with the one Socrates parodies in *De Sophistis Eleuchis*. You analyzed the jail letters and the declarations of the ROTE ARMEE FRAKTION [Red Army Faction] in the file constituted by Klaus Croissant, in the light of the alternative between the non-pedagogical struggle and the Platonic pragmatics of dialogue. The antistrephon found its place naturally in this general strategy and you studied it as such. Now, two and a half years later, you confess the vanity of your manicheism. The antistrephon may very well be a weapon at the disposal of the weak; it is also the strength of philosophical discourse, for this latter is made up of reflexive (or speculative) statements of which it is one type. Your general approach to paradoxes is modified by it, as are your "politics." You say so. Your listeners, especially foreigners from poor countries, believe that with this move you have lost even more pugnacity, that you have become even more of a product of that cold thought and refined style which they call French and which exasperates them. On your side, little by little you stop justifying your interests, your tribulations, giving a good front to your disorder. It can even look like a challenge.

Who's going to follow you if you no longer even say where you want to go? But you take a certain pleasure in this silence. You feel its opacity as an interesting resource against Hegelianism or absolutism in general. You think you're making a contribution, however minute, to the destiny of what you believe philosophy to be: **figuring, and not just conceiving**. You find yourself in agreement with this Department, which is a figure now more than an organ.

The concessions to what you feel is expected become rarer. You'd like to neglect even what your own mind desires, make it accessible to thoughts it doesn't expect. You don't read anymore to strip authors, but to steal away from yourself. You aim at this deculturation in every direction: science fiction, underground cinema, linguistics and singular logics, monsters of plastic and sound, surprising banalities, oblique re-readings. You are unfaithful in your alliances like the barbarians of Clastres [prisoners who during an escape attempt turned against guards who had previously aided them-Trans.], but for a different reason, opposite at least. You're at war with the institutions of your own mind and with your own identity. And you know that with all this, you're probably only perpetuating Western philosophy, its laborious libertinage, and its obliging equanimity. At least you also know that the only chance (or mischance) to do so lies in setting philosophy beside itself.

Translated by Christophe Gallier, Steven Ungar, and Barbara Johnson  
"L'endurance et la profession" first appeared in French in no. 369 of *Critique*, a special issue entitled *La Philosophie malgre tout [Philosophy in spite of everything]*, February 1978. The present translation is printed with the kind permission of the author and Jean Piel, the editor.