One of the intriguing features of Lyotard's philosophy lies in the fact that it is articulated against a backdrop of contemporary political catastrophes which he seeks to trace to their origins and to situate in a broader perspective. From among these, three—Auschwitz, Hungary 1956, and Paris 1968—are singled out for what they reveal about the illusory nature of the age of modernity and the political ideals it spawned. All three represent instances of disillusionment in which a specific ideal of modernity was refuted by reality—the ideal of human rights by the reality of the Nazi genocide, the ideal of a people's self-determination by the Soviet repression in Hungary, and the dream of democracy of the student movement by the French riot police. Lyotard has lost faith in all "grand narratives," stories that are so all-encompassing as to leave no room for narratives in which the claims of marginal, underprivileged, or simply different groups find expression. It is for the rights of these local narratives that he pleads; only if they flourish, will we be safe from universalism and totalitarianism. What we have here is a first approximation of what it means to advocate a postmodern position on politics.

Lyotard's thought is also very contemporary in another respect: its philosophical approach. In fact, Lyotard comes from the phenomenological school, but he has taken the "linguistic turn." From Wittgenstein he learned that language can no longer be presented as a unified whole. Rather
it is composed of a multitude of different language games which cannot be reduced to one common denominator. We can easily see that what is at stake in the political realm has its counterpart in the philosophy of language. Just as the rights of every single narrative must be defended, so the integrity of each language game must be preserved. For Lyotard, these two realms (language and politics) are ultimately concerned with one and the same issue. The acknowledgment of the diversity of the language games is the alternative to the monistic soliloquy of modernity and to its totalitarian consequences in the field of our socio-political life. In this sense Wittgenstein is a postmodern philosopher. But he is not the only one. In what he calls “my book of philosophy,” The Differend, to our surprise, Lyotard claims that Kant is another proponent of postmodernism to whom he owes much. The book itself contains no less than four extensive “Notices” on Kant. On what grounds can Kant’s work be regarded as a “prologue to an honorable postmodernity”2 After all, Kant is usually considered to be an advocate of modernity. We have to ask in what ways Lyotard wants to mine critical philosophy: for its content or for its method? As we will see, Lyotard, by means of a brilliant and daring reinterpretation moves toward a reassessment of both architectonic and method.

Lyotard praises Kant’s philosophy, not for its intended systematic unity, but for its respect for heterogeneity. Kant, in his three Critiques, actually delineates three distinct spheres. He “recognizes”3 the specificity of each claim raised in these spheres and tries to pay due respect to them. Following Deleuze, Lyotard sees the central problem of the Kantian critique as a “conflict of the faculties” of knowledge. To each of these faculties corresponds a specific jurisdiction so that in each of the three Critiques, one of these faculties takes the lead and provides the principles: understanding in the first Critique, reason in the second, and judgment in the third. Lyotard no longer speaks of these as psychological faculties which necessarily intersect in a no less problematic “subject.” To him it is necessary that the Kantian philosophy undergo a Wittgensteinian revision. What used to be “representations” and their respective faculties now become “families of phrases,” the word “family” here alluding explicitly to Wittgenstein.4 The content of critical philosophy is thus reinterpreted in terms of a philosophy of language. As a result the domains of the three Critiques can now be defined as the realms of the “cognitive phrase,” the “ethical phrase,” and the “aesthetic phrase,” respectively. Accordingly, the conflict between the faculties becomes a differend which takes place between two families of phrases. Indeed, Lyotard goes so far with his linguistic reconstruction of the Kantian argument as to interpret the raw sensory state experienced through sensitivity as a “phrase.” The contact between brute sensation and the pure forms of sensibility, as they are presented in the Transcendental Aesthetic, is then seen as a