

## THE PHILOSOPHER ON THE FLYING TRAPEZE. LYOTARD OR LEOTARD?

In the study of philosophy and theory, we are accustomed to receiving large answers to small questions. It can be intoxicating to look through a microscope at a previously un-regarded fragment, question or idea, and marvel at its significance when it is magnified, variously illuminated and prodded into life.

It is equally stimulating, but possibly more hazardous, to confront a Big Question, armed only with a few small answers, drawn from a little scholarship and framed in a few pages of words. This is what I intend to do. The Question in question is the title. My small answer to this Big Question will consider the relationship between contemporary cultural theory, represented here by Jean-Francois Lyotard, French postmodernist philosopher (1925-1998), and circus arts, represented by Jules Leotard, French aerialist (1838-1870).

Both of these men were cultural pioneers by most definitions of 'culture.' To define culture, I like the simple version: "The way we do things around here."<sup>1</sup> Each man reflected his times, absorbed the achievements of his predecessors, and exceeded them just enough to be celebrated in his own time. To go too far beyond one's current culture is to become untimely, an eccentric, ignored or ridiculed. Blake, Van Gogh, Joyce, Manley-Hopkins are known to us because their tangible writings and paintings remain to be posthumously appreciated when we are ready. How many philosophers, dancers, musicians, unpublished writers and forgotten painters have languished and disappeared by being too far ahead of their time?

In the circus arts, many performers who worked not only culturally, but also technologically ahead of their times, perished. Clowns died from lead-poisoning inherent in early white-face paint.<sup>2</sup> early lion tamers, working ‘en ferocite’ sometimes forgot the principle that angry lions eat people.<sup>3</sup> Tightrope walkers suddenly learned that they shouldn’t say, “I can do this with my eyes shut.”<sup>4</sup> Leapers, using new springboards found that to somersault over eight horses was easy work—landing was the problem.<sup>5</sup>

The subtitle of Steve Gossard’s excellent book “The Reckless Era of Aerial Performance” is “The Evolution of Trapeze.”<sup>6</sup> This Darwinian word, “evolution,” carries associations of mutation and selection. Selection cuts both ways, and as trapeze acts evolved, mutations of equipment, mischance, and incredible stupidity saw many aspirants selected suddenly, sadly, vertically downwards.

Here are the Brothers Banvard, performing at the Adelphi Music Hall in Oldham, England in 1868:

...one portion of the entertainment consists of the taller of the men suspending himself from his toes from the shoulders of his companion, whilst the other is standing erect on the bar of a trapeze, at a height of twenty feet from the stage, and that it is his duty .... to slip as it were from this posture as if he were falling head foremost on the people beneath him. The cleverness of the feat consists in arresting his downfall by catching with his feet the horizontal bar on which the other is standing, and then to hang head downwards. On this occasion, however, the performer missed the trick and fell into the orchestra, suffering a broken arm and “mashed” fingers.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to these anachronistic martyrs, both Leotard and Lyotard were perfect for their time, and just as Lyotard did not perish from post-modernism, Leotard did not experience trapeze trauma. Lyotard was born on August 1, 1838 in Toulouse, France. His father, Jean, was a Professor of Gymnastics with his own extensive studio in the district of Haute-Garonne. Young Jules passed his exams and was destined for a career in law, but at the age of eighteen, he began to work seriously in the gymnasium, and to experiment with trapeze bars above the swimming pool.

Consider the era. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had seen the flowering of Romanticism, in which the artist, the poet or other hero is seen to celebrate unfettered humanity, to soar unencumbered by the repression of classical, civic or even moral inhibitions. Byron, Keats and Shelley personified this spirit in poetry. As happens, a cultural movement may be in decline with the intelligentsia before it is finally picked up and manifested by the masses. Thus, as European manners, dress, religion and politics were entering the sombre 'Victorian' age, to be brightened only by the pre-Raphaelites, the public was still eager to see manifestations of the remarkable, aspiring 'romantic' human spirit. Acrobats exhibiting, by costume and posture, extreme manliness, were seen as heroic, Promethean beings, lifting the state of man closer to that of God. Even Nietzsche reflected these passions when he wrote, in 1885 in "Also Sprach Zarathustra," "Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman - a rope over an abyss. A dangerous going-over, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and staying-still," and, "One does not kill by anger but by laughter. Come let us kill the Spirit of Gravity!"<sup>8</sup>

The current architectural advances, improved lighting and new publicity techniques of mass entertainment, made this a time when a bold performer could catch the popular imagination and become a star. Leotard took this opportunity.

His innovation was, simply, that he flew. His achievement was so fundamental, so significant, and so brilliantly executed that when he first appeared at the Cirque Napoleon, Paris,<sup>9</sup> on November 12th 1859, his co-artists sponsored a banquet in his honour, and a commemorative medal was struck.<sup>10</sup> His rig consisted of three trapezes, and he swung and leaped from one to another in a variety of positions, for a twelve minute act, before alighting, with a somersault, to his carpet-covered safety platform below. The entire sequence would be considered an advanced training drill in a Circus School today, but in his time, it was sensational. Jules Leotard became one of the world's first superstars. He appeared in several European capitals, and in the USA, and was the focus of great adulation. G. Strehly, author of "L'Acrobatie et les Acrobates," actually saw Leotard perform, and recalls the hysteria:

This 'saltimbanque' was the king of fashion. It's hard to believe the welcome he received in Paris. When there is not much politics, the public's passion looks for a new object. For a while, Leotard was that object. He caused a storm everywhere. There were queues to get into the Circus; people fought for seats. In addition, advertising assured that the artist's name was in vogue, and we saw the appearance of Leotard cravats, Leotard walking sticks, Leotard brooches.<sup>11</sup>

In 1868 he was celebrated in a song by George Leybourne,

He flies through the air with the greatest of ease

That daring young man on the flying trapeze.

He was mentioned by Passepartout in Verne's "Around the World in Eighty Days":

I believe I'm honest, monsieur, but to be outspoken, I've had several trades. I've been an itinerant singer, a circus-rider, when I used to vault like Leotard, and dance on a rope like Blondin.<sup>12</sup>

His eponymous one-piece costume was much imitated at the time, and much modified and worn by dancers and acrobats ever since. Leotard died of smallpox in 1870 in Spain, at the age of 33.

Jean-Francois Lyotard was born in 1925 in Versailles, France. Most of his life he taught philosophy, first at a High School in Algeria, then at Vincennes University (Paris VIII). He observed the development of Twentieth Century counter philosophies, which conspired against the comfortable but woolly mode of literary criticism that became labelled 'liberal humanism.' Typical of this mode, which was still being used in schools up to the 1970s, were the unquestioning acceptance of the 'Western Canon,' and the use of terms like 'great,' 'inspired,' 'art,' and 'beauty'. In the 1950s Levi-Strauss and Barthes, developing the linguistic work of Saussure, looked for, or constructed, codes by which to measure texts. They encouraged critics to look for patterns, parallels and reflections in texts, to draw meaning from the text's structure; this was termed 'structuralism.'

Lyotard then saw a succession of post-structuralists, inspired by Nietzsche's axiom "There are no facts, only interpretations."<sup>13</sup> Barthes and Derrida became skeptical of any quasi-scientific method, and seemed to revel in the certainty that nothing is

certain. In deconstructional criticism, the post-structuralists looked for meaning behind meaning, or meaning in spite of meaning.

As a teacher, Lyotard would have witnessed the profound changes that deconstruction brought about in what was once called 'Literary Appreciation' in schools. Students, possibly for the first time, heard of, and studied, critics and critical methods. Inevitably, the restraints of a school timetable would sometimes preclude the actual study of literature. Now, anything from a film to a bus ticket, was 'text.'

Post-modernism, which is actually post-post-structuralism chronologically, takes its name from Modernism. Modernism is easily defined as covering any Nineteenth or Twentieth Century cultural phenomenon which sits comfortably with the appellation, "Modern," e.g. Modern Art, Modern Music, and Modern Architecture. Like most mode words, "Modern" soon became impotent, to be replaced by "contemporary," which gave way to "innovative" which by now already means "the same as everyone else is doing."<sup>14</sup> Rather in the same way that the general public's late take-up of Romanticism helped Leotard's success, so the term "post-modern," in its declining years, is now heard on the street, replacing "innovative," and describing anything from haircuts to mobile phone tones.

It was Lyotard who described post-modernism as "incredulity towards meta-narratives."<sup>15</sup> This is a bold move, possibly as courageous as Leotard's first leap from the trapeze bar. A meta-narrative is an over-arching value system, belief, or cultural archetype. Post-modernists enjoy de-bunking, and discovering that under a sign is just another sign. They prefer irony to explanation. With post-modernism, everything is a

surface, and there is no depth. Baudrillard calls this ‘hyperreality,’ and uses Disneyland as an example of how there is less to things than meets the eye.

Jean-Francois Lyotard has had the courage to enter centre ring, and climb atop this teetering, Seuss-ian<sup>16</sup> tower of liberal humanism, structuralism, post-structuralism, supported (or destabilized) by outriggers of Marxism, feminism, post-colonialism, and many others. Like any other performer, he attracts the admiration and applause of the crowd, even though some may be fans of other cultural acrobats who are now languishing in the lower strata. He will remain triumphantly aloft until, as his philosophy becomes accepted, the pyramid is identified as a meta-narrative, loses its credibility, and is promptly deconstructed. He will then become a ‘differend’ and vanish.

Lyotard was a professional philosopher—perhaps “philosopher” was listed under “occupation” on his passport. Throughout his life he thought, wrote, and argued for a living. At his death, of leukaemia in 1998 at the age of 73, obituaries, though always referring to the controversies he had caused among philosophers, nevertheless spoke kindly of him and of the paradoxes by which he lived.<sup>17</sup>

He went to Algeria as a young man to teach in high school, developing there his philosophy of war, and becoming aware of the futility of imposing one cultural system on another. He was in Paris in the sixties, as the official spokesman of ‘Socialisme ou Barbarie.’ In the view of the *Journal of Radical Philosophy*,<sup>18</sup> this was his only worthwhile period. After that he allegedly sold out, abandoned the Socialists, and became the darling of the Socialites. Throughout the seventies and eighties he continued to surprise, with titles and concepts such as “Libidinal Economy,”<sup>19</sup> “Post-modernism,”<sup>20</sup>

“The Differend,”<sup>21</sup> “Just Gaming,”<sup>22</sup> and works on such apparently differing subjects as Marcel Duchamp, Marx and Freud, law, language, and war.

His was certainly, like Leotard’s, a fashionable name to use around town. Letters, journals, lectures, books and the internet had spread his words to academics all over the world. Such was his reputation and respect that on his death, some French radio stations observed a moment’s silence.

Jules Leotard made, literally, “one giant leap for mankind” one hundred and ten years before Neil Armstrong. Once he had done it, the public demanded that he keep doing the same thing. Had he lived beyond 33 years, he may have declined and been forgotten. The same may be imagined of other legends who died young, such as James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Elvis Presley, or even Jesus of Nazareth, who was also 33 at his death.

Jean-Francois Lyotard, having made his mark at the age of 23,<sup>23</sup> worked in a context wherein one could not keep repeating the same trick. Apart from the lecture circuit, a philosopher has an obligation to keep presenting new ‘tricks,’ or variations on a theme, which Lyotard did for fifty years. Not for him were the excited crowd of some hundreds, intoxicated by the occasion, who would believe the ‘hype,’ remember more than they actually saw, and spread the artist’s fame, gaining glory by association. No, the philosopher must see his work published, or engage in recorded seminars. These words will be stored, studied, analysed, generally by people who will see, not more, but less than was presented to them. His words will last, and continue to be read and believed even after he has discarded them and the ideology that inspired them. He may be attacked, ridiculed or, like McLuhan, ignored by his peers and descendants. His leaps into

the unknown, though bold and spectacular at the time, may eventually be judged unnecessary and misguided rather than courageous.

Lyotard will be, and was, remembered by academics. His concept of post-modernism (although he did not coin the phrase) will be current until superseded. Like Plato, Marx, Freud and McLuhan he may be remembered by inaccurate slogans, clichés or stereotypes.

Jules Leotard, equally meteoric in his time, had the dubious fortune to have his name attached to a costume. Like other eponyms--Hoover, Biro, Wellington, Sandwich, Macintosh—his associated object will transcend his actual life's achievements. In the history of circus, however, he will always be respected.

How did word of Leotard's achievement travel around the western world in the mid-nineteenth century? In the world of circus, there has always been a bush, telegraph, or grapevine second to none.

The European Circus community forms a little world. It is composed of some thousands of people who, directly or indirectly, all know each other. In the several dozen European Circuses work friends and family members. They are purveyors of information which they transmit by telephone or courier. And then, into the little space enclosed by the ring boxes news travels from all over the continent. The trapezist's cousin working for Robert's in England, lets it be known that the son of Untel the clown is to wed the Director's daughter, while the animal trainer's brother who is with Krone in Germany, has information about the accident that befell a well-known wire-walker. It's a veritable 'Arab telephone.'<sup>24</sup>

Circus fans, a remarkable species of dedicated acolytes, also act as the stationary notice-board for the peripatetic circus companies, by gathering and passing on news.

Thus, performers are generally aware of what acts are being performed, and who is performing what new trick.<sup>25</sup> Sam Keen describes a trip to Las Vegas where he sat, “a fledgling among eagles” with some of the world’s greatest aerialists, the poets and philosophers of the trapeze. It is at gatherings such as this that the past and future are assessed.

I had been included in a community of celebrants, an ecclesia of the air, gathered from the corners of the earth into an improbable tabernacle...There was a conspiracy there - a breathing together - a high flying companionship, an appreciation of excellence, a mutual admiration, a generous sharing of knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

Inevitably, there is a cultural synchronicity across the world in circus as in other human activities. Circus Oz in Melbourne, and Suitcase Circus in Edinburgh both arose, apparently from nothing, in 1977.<sup>27</sup> “New Circus” chronicles how Big Apple Circus, New York and Circus Roncalli, Austria, also arose at about the same time.<sup>28</sup>

Leotard’s fame certainly spread far and fast in 1859, as he was celebrated for being the first man to fly through the air. Many promoters and Ringmasters will use the words ‘first,’ ‘only,’ and ‘best,’ and this is thought to be within the generally acceptable limits of ballyhoo. Some artists are obsessed, such as Scott of the Antarctic, with the question of priority. A John Heurer of Hamilton, Ohio, advertised in 1883 that he was “the only person on earth who stands with his head on a swinging bar, and while balancing in this difficult position Juggles Balls, Drinks Water, Fires Pistols....” etc. “I

challenge the world \$1,000 in gold to anyone who will do my act. TRY IT AND BREAK YOUR NECK.”<sup>29</sup> It is not easy to ascertain whether philosophers or cultural theorists were ever so adamant about their originality.

Among these latter groups, perhaps only Plato and Freud—and possibly Marx and Socrates—have earned their own popular eponymous adjectives. Platonic love and the Freudian slip have entered common use, but it is hard enough even to construct an adjective for Saussure, Bourdieu, Derrida, Foucault or Barthes.

Possibly, the cult of personality is not important in the history of philosophy, except, perhaps, to publishers. It may be the case that each stage completed, like a kilometer of railway track, is simply a necessary connection between the past and the future. Track inspectors, looking back, may ask who was responsible for certain bumps, curves or blind sidings, and students of theory per se will, by reason of academic speciality, choose to get off the train and dwell for years alongside a particular stretch, extolling its virtues.

In the circus, fame and posterity are assured by spectacular innovations (Leotard, Colleano), longevity and popular success (Gunther Gebel-Williams, Coco) or by a spectacular accident (Lilian Leitzel, Karl Wallenda).<sup>30</sup>

However, not all circuses publicise their stars, instead preferring to promote their own generic name. Some small companies hardly bother, and the advance agent simply plasters the town with signs that “The Circus is Coming!” At the other end of the scale, the first real multi-national circus corporation, “Cirque du Soleil,” seldom promotes individual performers. One traditional reason is that the top-billed artist could exert

pressure on management for better conditions or pay by threatening to leave, and thus invalidating a season's publicity.

In fact, the apparently radical Soleil follows many of the hallowed circus traditions: saturation marketing, highly visible presence, subtle put-down of the opposition, and, most of all, that seductive blend of 'otherness' and familiarity. In this case, it is the familiarity that the upmarket clientele feel with comfortable seats and stunning production values. The otherness is represented by trans-cultural titles—Saltimbanco, Alegria, O, Quidam, Dralion, Nouba, and costumes and music belonging to no known culture, yet drawn from many exotic sources.

Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey, hitherto known as 'The Big One,' traditionally features a star, á la Hollywood, each season. When I saw the Blue Unit in 1984, it was Gebel-Williams; and, more recently, in 1996, at Madison Square Garden, it was Airiana who was shot daily from a cannon. This is just a different way of advertising, probably suiting the American market, where sport and entertainment news tends to focus on stories of individuals. Jules Leotard was one of the first performers promoted internationally in this way.

Twentieth century theory has had its share of stars. Many are remembered for phrases that have become clichés. The post-modern phenomenon of books like the *Idiot's Guide to Existentialism*, *Socrates for Dummies*, and *The Tao of Pooh*, has condemned many serious thinkers to be remembered as clichés. McLuhan is the message, and he was also the guy in the Woody Allen film! Bourdieu has also featured in a film, called "Sociology is a Combat Sport." Derrida has had a radio show, denying responsibility for most of the things for which he is famous. Barthes wrote "The Death

of the Author.” He did the great disappearing illusion: he was seen getting into a box/book, when—Poof!—the box/book was seen to be empty! He re-appears upstage as the remarkable author of the text with no author! Deafening applause! Not surprisingly, the literary audience cannot wait for the next act. It is Slippery Jack Derrida, the deconstructing man!

If, as I have suggested, a little learning about theory is the norm, then it is quite valid to equate its study with the catch phrases and special effects of the circus ring. Conversely, if a circus performer has studied his craft long and carefully, and consciously tackled a feat or concept never done before, then he deserves much more than the scant and prejudiced consideration usually accorded to his kind.

In a search for what makes a philosopher famous, we find a pantheon of critics—Benjamin, de Man, Hillis Miller, James—whose analyses can beatify the new arrival on the firmament. We also detect a succession: humanism, structuralism, post-structuralism, psychoanalytical criticism, feminism, Marxism, queer theory, new historicism, post-colonialism, post-modernism. If not entirely chronological, like the Houses who held the English Throne, they do seem to be mutually exclusive, each eclipsing the one before it. It does seem to be that after the great schools of philosophy, Greek, British, French and German that we are familiar with, the Twentieth Century seems to have delivered, mostly from France, a hit-parade of Fashion Philosophers, with special interest ‘Boutique Theories.’

Important to this relationship between circus and theory, between Leotard and Lyotard, is that discourse would only go one way. We have no record of Jules Leotard’s work being influenced by cultural theory, nor did his act seem to comment on

structuralism, post-modernism nor even liberal humanism. His one-piece costume may have put him in the avant-garde of feminism, and a flying man holds central place in the “dream theory” of psychoanalysis, but these readings must surely be retrospective, rather than active, on his part.

Lyotard could speak on Leotard, but not vice versa. Would this make Leotard the farmer, and Lyotard the chef? A primary producer, Leotard, interpreted by a sophisticate, Lyotard, who makes palatable the work of a primitive. Is Leotard the tree, and Lyotard the ivy? The mammal and the tape-worm, or the host and the parasite?

In the spirit of ‘Deep Wisdom for Shallow Idiots,’ or ‘We’re post-modern now, anything goes!’, let us invite a group of cultural theorists to the Cirque Napoleon to see Jules Leotard, ‘That Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze.’ Imagine this group of cultural theorists clustered in one of the boxes reserved for the aristocracy, or the nouveaux riches. They have heard the rumours, they have read the bills, and now they gather to read the text (see the show).

*Jules Leotard ascends a rope ladder to the platform, and grasps the first of three trapezes, suspended over a carpet-covered “safety” catwalk.*

Wittgenstein: Look, it’s a meta-linguistic text, we can all see what he intends. (*He leaves*)

Derrida: Yes, it’s a dishonest pursuit of certainty.

Barthes: A zero degree of sense.

Derrida: No, I mean that Logocentric stuff about “The Flying Man”, when there’s a good chance he might fall. Nothing is certain, because if it were, it would exclude ‘the other’.

Lyotard: Yeah. Let’s hear it for the differend! (*Aside*) Which one is the differend, Leotard or gravity? It’s usually more obvious.

Foucault: It depends which one has the power.

Derrida: Let’s look in the programme. There’s nothing outside the text, and it says here he will fly.

Leotard: And I will if I get the chance.

Derrida: Wait, Monsieur Leotard, you cannot do it. Nothing is real because everything is only a cultural, linguistic or historical construct.

Leotard: You come up here and say that.

Foucault: You have the high ground because of an episteme. You have the power. You are white, male and sane.

Leotard: Thank you. Now I shall leap from this trapeze without a safety net.

Foucault: OK Leo, I admit you must be mad. You are legitimate.

Lacan: Hey, Jules, don't forget the unconscious is structured as a language.

Leotard: Shut up. I'm trying to think.

Lacan: Exactly. But, what about your gender signifier?

Leotard: It's tucked into my leotard.

Freud: Oops, you nearly slipped.

Bakhtin: Let the Carnival commence!

Saussure: Carnival signifies Clown, which signifies Idiot, which signifies a waste of time

Bakhtin: I wouldn't be so sure if I were you.

Saussure: Well, um, actually, you would be Saussure.

Bakhtin: That's it. I'm outa here. *(He storms off to sit in the cheap seats.)*

Hazlitt: Excuse me, gentlemen, may I say a few words?

All: No, because you're English, you're a writer, you're lucid, and you're a liberal humanist. Come back later.

Leotard: I'm getting scared.

Lyotard: Just pretend you can fly.

Leotard: But it's just a delusion.

Lyotard: But, a delusion can last a long time. How long is your act?

Leotard: Twelve minutes. It'll never work.

Lyotard: Don't be skeptical towards your meta-narrative, that's my job. Do you think you'll make it?

Leotard: Yes, I think so.

All: We think you don't think so.

Leotard: I think you actually think I think so.

All: We think you think we don't think you think so.

Leotard: That's just your theory.

All: Precisely.

Leotard: If you'll excuse me, I have a trapeze to catch.

Saussure (*aside*): He means a syntagmatic plane to signify...

And so on.

The human race advances by mutations. Individuals and societies move in fits and starts, setting new standards, opening new possibilities for the rest of us. Inventors, explorers, philosophers, mystics, scientists, artists and children are among the names we give to the research and development branch of humanity. Lyotard was a philosopher, and Leotard an artist/inventor/explorer. Lyotard provoked thought and political action, but also criticism and argument. Leotard provoked awe, wonder and inspiration, but little controversy.

In common, they both stepped off a safe platform, attracted attention, generated imitation and opened new territory for their followers. Each is fondly remembered by

those who study his field. Each may be unacknowledged by the wider public who benefit from their daring initiatives.

William Hazlitt, who never saw Leotard, did see Richer,  
...the famous rope-dancer, perform at Sadler's Wells. He was matchless in his art, and added to his extraordinary skill exquisite ease, and unaffected natural grace. I was at that time employed in copying a half-length picture of Sir Joshua Reynolds's; and it put me out of conceit with it. How ill this part was made out in the drawing! How heavy, how slovenly this other was painted! I could not help saying to myself, "If the rope-dancer had performed his task in this manner, leaving so many gaps and blotches in his work, he would have broke his neck long ago..."<sup>31</sup>

Talking about "The Indian Jugglers," but, metaphorically I suggest, for writers and philosophers, he says,

Danger is a good teacher, and makes apt scholars. So are disgrace, defeat, exposure to immediate scorn and laughter. There is no opportunity in such cases for self-delusion, no idling time away, no being off your guard (or you may take the consequences).<sup>32</sup>

Are philosophy and action mutually exclusive? Can we imagine a composite of Lyotard and Leotard, an artist of action who is also a creative philosopher? Explorers and mountaineers are often reflective, perhaps inspired by solitude and epic endeavour. Will Rogers, the American cowboy rope-spinner, political commentator and fireside philosopher managed the combination. Saint-Exupery, early aviator, writer, philosopher, who like Glen Miller, simply disappeared in flight, combined radical action and deep

thought. Hemingway, who saw himself as an action man, certainly explored the subject, and spoke of the perfect form of the bullfighter as “grace under pressure,” which is what Lyotard certainly needed as his work, his philosophy, and his intellect were challenged by others throughout his life.

Sam Keen is a theologian, spiritualist and psychologist who, at 61, discovered and learned flying trapeze in San Francisco. In “Learning to Fly,” he talks of “...what I call the aerial instinct, the desire to transcend our present condition (as) the defining characteristic of a human being.”<sup>33</sup> He also quotes E B White as saying, “A writer, like an acrobat, must occasionally try for a stunt that is too much for him.”<sup>34</sup>

Three questions arise from the proverbial Big Question. Which of the two men is most remembered? Which most deserves to be? Finally, should we be considering an either/or answer at all?

Jules Leotard has many more mentions in dance-wear catalogues and circus histories. Jean-Francois Lyotard has far more books on shelves, and pages on the internet. While Leotard has a display in the Toulouse Museum, we do not know of a museum of post-modernism. If there is such a thing, there is probably a sign outside that reads “Closed for Deconstruction.”

Leotard, the man who was the toast of Europe in the 1860s, is almost forgotten. Aficionados honour him for his pioneering leap into space, but if he had not done it, another surely would have. Already some argue that Thomas Hanlon may have performed a flying trick, from a swing to a vertical ‘web’ rope in 1858.<sup>35</sup> Certainly, Leotard was immediately imitated by circus performers in Europe, Russia and the USA. This leads us to the question of Leotard’s significance. Is he worth the plaque that bears

his name on the wall of the Cirque d'Hiver in Paris? An extension of this line of questioning is to debate whether there is any point in celebrating priority in any field. Does it go beyond the crass cataloguing of the Guinness Book of Records?

In the collection of Lyotard's letters, oddly entitled "The Postmodern Explained to Children," he says,

...writing a philosophical text, alone at one's table (or taking a walk...)....We write before knowing what to say and how to say it, and in order to find out, if possible. Philosophical writing is ahead of us where it is supposed to be. Like a child, it is premature and insubstantial.<sup>36</sup>

It has always been children who "play on swings." Jules Leotard simply extended the life and scope of his childhood games professionally. It is children, too, who ask the awkward Big Questions of "why?" and "why not?" Jean-Francois Lyotard acknowledged this in his "Address on the Subject of the Course in Philosophy." Writing about the importance of the philosophy course at the College Internationale de Philosophie at Vincennes University, which is very popular among mature students, he says,

Maybe there is more childhood available to thought at thirty-five than at eighteen, and more outside a degree course than in one. A new task for didactic thought: to search out its childhood anywhere and everywhere, even outside childhood.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps we have arrived at a commonality between Leotard and Lyotard. We need not look for a superiority of one over the other. We need not ask "Which of these heroes most deserves to be recognized by history for his contribution to humanity? Which most deserves to be immortalized in the Pantheon of legendary French pioneers?"

Which will we talk about to our grandchildren? Which should be represented on a postage stamp? Which has done most to advance his era, his nation, and his species? Lyotard, who flew in the face of structuralism, or Leotard, who simply flew? From each we learn the potential of the human.

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1 See Executive Scottish, "Plan for Action on Alcohol Problems"<<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/health/alcoholproblems/docs/paaap-07.asp/>>, 2003. Kevin M. Thomson, *The Company Culture Cookbook: How to Change the Way We Do Things around Here*, (London: Financial Times/Prentice Hall, 2002). Louise Stoll, *Changing Our Schools: Linking School Effectiveness and School Improvement*. (Bristol, PA: Taylor Francis, 1996). I am unable to find the origin of this definition, having originally suspected Garrison Keillor of "Lake Wobegone." Now we find it increasingly applied to office culture (Thomson), school culture (Stoll), and even drinking culture (Scottish Executive).

2 Henry Mayhew. *London Labour and the London Poor*, 1968 ed., Four volumes, Vol. 3. (New York: Dover, 1861), 120. Mayhew tells of the dangers to street clowns of using 'dry white lead' as face paint.

3 George Speaight. *A History of the Circus*, (London: The Tantivy Press, 1980), 83. "...an Irishman, Macarte, had his arm torn off on one occasion and lost his life in 1872 while presenting a noisy act with a sword and pistols, in imitation of a so-called lion hunt; he was probably not quite sober at the time."

4 Rupert Croft-Cooke. *Circus: a World History*, (London: Elek, 1976), 122. "Mrs Powell, who appeared at a fete in Aston Park, Birmingham, in July 1863... She was thirty-six years of age and had been walking the tightrope for thirty-three of them, but on this occasion her long experience failed her. A sack was placed over head, for she was to walk the rope blindfolded, but she had hardly gone a yard when she slipped and fell to her death."

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- 5 Antony Hippisley-Coxe. *A Seat at the Circus*, (Hamden, CN: Archon, 1980), 204. With the springboard known as the 'batoude', "many an artist has been killed in trying to turn a triple somersault in this act. In a triple, a man is apt to find himself out of control and there is a serious danger of his falling on the back of his neck."
- 6 Steve Gossard. *A Reckless Era of Aerial Performance, The Evolution of the Trapeze*, (USA: Self-published, 1991).
- 7 Gossard, 32.
- 8 Friedrich Nietzsche. *Zarathustra's Discourses*, (London: Penguin, 1995), 7, 40.
- 9 Speaight, 73.
- 10 G. Strehly. *L'Acrobatie Et Les Acrobates*, trans. by R. Bolton, (Paris: Librairie S Zlatin, 1903), 179.
- 11 Strehly, 177.
- 12 Jules Verne. *Around the World in Eighty Days*, (London: Dent, 1975), chapter 10.
- 13 Friedrich Nietzsche. *Truth and Lie in Extra-Moral Sense*, (New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1979), 81.
- 14 Observed, with some irony, by the Director of the WA Ballet, on ABC radio, around 1995.
- 15 Jean-Francois Lyotard. *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, (Sydney: power Publications, 1992), xxiv.
- 16 Dr. Seuss. "If I ran the Circus," in *Illustrated Verse Book*, Reprint C, (New York: Random House, 1956). Author of "Green Eggs and Ham." Not to be confused with Saussure
- 17 "He was a man of 'peregrinations' (as he called them), through many countries and zones of thought, where he invented an art of hearing the 'otherness' in others and of responding to what was new, odd, amiss around him. Already in 1971, he was attempting to offer a new view of the unconscious in art, at odds with the prevailing linguistic or structural one, opening onto the problems of presenting the unrepresentable - seeing what we can't see, thinking what we can't yet think. "Speaking at Lyotard's funeral, Lionel Jospin, the French Prime Minister, called for a moment of silence in the Chambre des Deputes." "Artform" International Magazine Inc. 1998. John Rajchman.
- 18 "The irony is that the story of the disenchantment with grand narratives has become the grandest of postmodern narratives, and has given its author the authority he so contested" "Radical Philosophy," 91. 1998. David Macey.
- 19 'Libidinal Economy' (1974) Indiana University Press, 1993
- 20 'The Post-Modern Condition' (1979) Manchester University Press, 1984
- 21 'The Differend: Phrases in Dispute' (1983) Manchester University Press, 1986
- 22 'Just Gaming' (1979) Manchester University Press, 1984
- 23 "In 1948 the French review *Temps Modernes* commissioned three students born in 1925 to record their observations of life after the war; Lyotard was one of them". Williams, James. "Lyotard. Towards a Postmodern Philosophy" Polity Press. 1998.
- 24 Hugues Hotier. *Cirque, Communication and Culture*, (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires, Bordeaux, 1995), 209.
- 25 John F. McConnell "A Ring, a Horse and a Clown - The Story of the Hannefords." The author tells how Lucio Cristiani, the famous flier, drove 200 miles one night to see George Hanneford perform a flying back sault. p. 176
- 26 Sam Keen. *Learning to Fly*, (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), 103. James Lipton's "An Exultation of Larks" suggests "A Wrangle of Philosophers" as the collective noun. "An ecclesia of the air" certainly sounds more companionable.
- 27 Sue Broadway. "Circus Oz - the First Seven Years: A Memoir," *Australasian Drama Studies*, no. 35 (1999): 172-83.
- 28 Reg Bolton. *New Circus*, (London: Fundacao Calouste Gulbenkian. United Kingdom and Commonwealth Branch, 1987).
- 29 Gossard, 17.
- 30 Colleano: first man to do a Front Somersault on a wire. Gebel-Williams: star animal trainer for 30 years, USA. Coco: beloved clown of Bertram Mills Circus, England. Leitzel: legendary aerialist of the 40's, who died when her rigging broke. Wallenda: survivor of spectacular High Wire feats and accidents, who was blown off an outdoor wire at the age of 74.
- 31 William Hazlitt. "The Indian Jugglers," in *Table Talk*, (London: Everyman Library, 1824), 79.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 80.
- 33 Keen, 27.
- 34 *Ibid.*, 231.
- 35 Gossard, 35.

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36 Lyotard, 119.

37 Ibid., 123.