Postmodernism
Supplement Contents

Also, see Dr. Boling's notes on Postmodernism in "Speaker Notes."

Key Thinkers:

Immanuel Kant (German Philosopher, 1724-1804) : Immanuel Kant was born in Königsberg, East Prussia (modern day Kaliningrad, Russia) into a humble family of origin. His family belonged to a protestant sect of pietists who were very concerned with religion.[1] When Kant grew up, he attended the University of Königsberg and studied philosophy, mathematics, and the natural sciences.[2] Early on, Kant was heavily influenced by the writings of philosopher David Hume. In 1770, Kant received a professorship at the University of Königsberg and in 1781 he published the first edition of his mammoth work, *A Critique of Pure Reason*. In this widely influential work, Kant insisted that there was no such thing as the objective knowledge that was espoused by the Cartesian and Empirical philosophers of the day.[3] Kant argued that we are bound by our perceptions and can never objectively know reality as it really is. In essence, he drew a distinction between reality as we experience it and reality as it really exists. His thoughts and writings have helped shape aspects of current postmodern approaches to various disciplines such as the physical sciences, psychology, and literary studies.[4]

Friedrich Nietzsche (German Philosopher 1844-1900) : Friedrich Nietzsche was born in Röcken, Germany. His father, a Lutheran pastor, passed away when Nietzsche was very young. His father's death deeply troubled Nietzsche and appeared often in his writings.[5] By the time Nietzsche entered the University of Bonn in 1864, he had completely rejected Christianity and firmly declared himself as an atheist.[6] Soon after this, Nietzsche contracted Syphilis, the disease that would eventually kill him, in a Leipzig brothel. Nietzsche was influenced by the philosophies of Schopenhauer and Lange and the music of Wagner, the German composer.[7] Nietzsche is famous for his declaration that "God is dead." Nietzsche also viewed man as a "chance product of a nature indifferent to purpose or value."[8] Much of Nietzsche's work was comprised of seeking to provide meaning for man as he exists in this meaningless situation lest he "decline into nihilism and barbarity."[9] Much of this new meaning

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[1] "Immanuel Kant." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed. 17 vols. Gale Research, 1998. Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale Group, 2005 (http://www.galenet.com/servlet/BioRC)
[2] Ibid
[3] "Immanuel Kant." *World Eras, Vol. 9: Industrial Revolution in Europe (1750-1914)*. Gale Group, 2002. Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale Group, 2005 (http://www.galenet.com/servlet/BioRC)
[4] Ibid
[5] "Fredrich Nietzsche." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed. 17 vols. Gale Research, 1998. Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale Group, 2005 (http://www.galenet.com/servlet/BioRC)
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid
[9] Ibid.

centered around his concept of a "will to power" (man's common urge to dominate and master) and the ideal "superman" (one who finds joy by "mastering his own existence").[10]

Michael Foucault (French Philosopher, 1926-1984) : Michael Foucault was born the son of a doctor in Pottiers, France in 1926. He went on to study at Ecole Normale Superieure and the University of Paris, Sorbonne. Foucault, an open homosexual, eventually went on to become professor and chairman of the History of Systems of Thought at the College de France. Much of Foucault's thinking was heavily influenced by the thought and writings of German philosophers Frederick Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger.[11] Foucault's work dealt primarily with historiography; especially developing his own distinct understanding of the forces that make history.[12] He tried to show that many of the ideas which people at a certain point in history believe to be permanent, objective truths are in fact societal constructs and change throughout the course of history.[13] He also analyzed the usage of power and its impact on cultures and the individuals within these cultures. His work has been influential in shaping some aspects of current thought surrounding the study of philosophy, history, literary criticism, and, specifically, to theoretical work in the human sciences.[14]

Jacques Derrida (French Philosopher, 1930-2004): Jacques Derrida was born in El Biar, Algiers in 1930. He studied at Ecole Normale in France and went on to teach at the Sorbonne and the Ecole Normale Superieure. He also guest taught at John Hopkins and Yale universities in the United States. Derrida is most famous for his development of a style of literary criticism termed "deconstruction."[15] The main thrust of deconstruction, as stated in his prominent work *Of Grammatology* (1976), is that "there is nothing outside the text."[16] Basically, no text has one set meaning; all is interpretation. Derrida believed that we are wrong to approach a text seeking its sole meaning or the author's intention. Derrida's concept of "intertextuality" provides for an infinite play on the meanings of a text. Although highly controversial, Derrida's work has been widely influential in postmodern literary criticism and University English departments

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[10] Ibid.
"Michel Foucault." *World of Sociology*. 2 vols. Gale Group, 2001.
Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2005.
http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC
[12] "Michel Foucault." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed. 17 Vols. Gale Research, 1998.
Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2005.
http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC
[13] Ibid "Foucault" *World of Sociology*
[14] Ibid "Foucault" *Encyclopedia of World Biography*
[15] "Jacques Derrida." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*, 2nd ed. 17 Vols. Gale Research, 1998.
Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2005.
http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC
[16] Ibid.

Stanley Eugene Fish (American Philosopher, 1938 -   ): Stanley Fish was born in 1938 in Providence, Rhode Island. He attended the University of Pennsylvania for his undergraduate education, and he went on to earn his MA and Ph.D. at Yale University. Fish is a respected authority on cultural criticism, law, and, in particular, literary theory. Widely recognized as an expert on the writings of such 17th century poets as Milton (author of *Paradise Lost*), Fish bases his innovative and radical interpretations of literature on the deconstructionist notion that the reader is largely responsible for creating the meaning of a text.[17] A very enigmatic scholar, Fish has aimed much criticism at politically liberal ideologies, has been influenced by such Christian authors as C.S. Lewis, and considers himself to be a "radical conservative" and "favorably inclined" towards religion.[18] At the same time, he often declines to discuss his religious convictions and has been heralded by some respected Christian commentators as "America's most committed secularist" (a title Fish personally renounces).[19] Fish has held professorships at such respected institutions as John Hopkins University and Duke University and is currently a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Illinois, Chicago.

"The Big Story"

by J. Budziszewski

"Hi, Professor Theophilus — oh, your coffee! I didn't mean to startle you."

"My fault, Sarah. I didn't know you were there. Hand me that spill towel, would you? Right behind you — on the hook."

"Sure," she said, complying. "I've never known a professor who kept a 'spill towel' in his office. Is it always that easy to sneak up on you?"

"Yes, it's a good thing I'm not a Renaissance prince; I'd be easy prey for assassins." I tried to keep the coffee from running off the desk onto the floor. "Perhaps you're planning a little assassination yourself this morning?"

"Oh, no."

"Sure about that? No grading complaints, no protests that my shoes are made of leather?"

"None whatsoever, Professor T. I was just hoping you could explain something that's puzzling me in two of my other courses."

"The same thing is puzzling you in both of them?"

"Yes."

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[17] "Stanley Eugene Fish" *Contemporary Authors Online*, Gale, 2005. Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2005. http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC

[18] Danielski , Deborah. "Deconstructing the Abortion License" http://deborahdanielski.faithweb.com/deconstr.htm

[19] Ibid "Deconstructing"

"What courses?"

"Literature and social theory."

Carefully, I encircled the puddle of coffee with the towel. "Haven't you tried getting help from your professors?"

"Yes, but my literature professor won't tell me his office hours. When I ask for them, he frowns, grumbles something about 'hegemonic chronologies,' and walks away."

"And the social theory professor?"

"She tries to answer my questions, but her answers make me more confused than ever."

"Did you tell her that?"

"Yes, and she said 'It's all part of increasing your negative capacity.'"

I opened my towel drawer, threw the soiled towel in with the others, stood and hung out a fresh one. Sarah's eyes became a little rounder, but she said nothing. "All right," I said, "tell me what's confusing you in these courses."

"Postmodernism. Both teachers are postmodernists."

"Ahhhhh. Yes, I see why asking questions didn't help."

"Can you help me?"

"Maybe. Be more specific."

"Can - you - help - me - understand - postmodernism?"

"No, no. I meant you should be specific about what's confusing you."

"Well ..." Sarah pondered. "My lit professor keeps talking about how 'the text does not exist.' At first I thought he meant that we're using a readings packet instead of a textbook, but that's not it."

"Go on."

"And he says 'We are all perspectivists now.' One day in class I asked, 'Do you just mean we all have different perspectives on things?' He said 'Yes! Yes!' So I said 'I get it. To see how things *really* are we need to *compare* our perspectives, right? And that's why we read literature?'"

"What did he say?"

"Nothing. He slapped his hand to his cheek, rolled his eyes, and said something about 'Philistines.' I knew I'd crashed, but I couldn't figure out why."

I smiled. "And in your social theory course?"

"Now that's really strange," said Sarah. "My social theory teacher keeps talking about 'constructing reality.' I asked 'Do you mean something like building a civilization? She answered 'No, that project belongs to *your* reality.' So I asked, 'What do you mean by *my* reality? How could there be more than one? Do you mean my *interpretation* of reality?'"

"And how did she answer then?"

"She looked owlish and said 'Listen closely: Interpretation is all there is.'"

"Anything else?"

"Lots and lots. For example I'm supposed to be 'suspicious of metanarratives,' whatever *they* are. Both of my teachers say that. Oh, Professor T, do you think I'll ever understand postmodernism?"

I laughed. "I think you understand postmodernism very well. The only thing that surprises me is that you haven't come across it on campus before now. Postmodernism is everywhere. It's one of the main ideologies in the modern university."

"But it all sounds like nonsense!"

"It is nonsense."

"Oh," she said, and was silent for a bit. Then she looked up. "So I'm not stupid?"

"Sarah, your only problem is that you have too much common sense."

She chewed on that for awhile. "That's nice, Prof, but it doesn't help me out in my two courses."

"No, I shouldn't think it would."

"Do you see my problem? I mean, postmodernism might be nonsense, but it's my teachers' nonsense. So knowing that it's nonsense isn't enough. I've got to know what *kind* of nonsense it is, why *they* believe it, and how to *answer* it."

"Well said."

"So."

"So," I echoed.

"So can you help me?"

I collected my thoughts. "All right, Sarah," I began, "think carefully. "Post-" means "after." "You've taken the European history course. What do you suppose is the *modernism* that *post*modernism is *post?* What big intellectual movement does it come after?"

"Um — the Enlightenment maybe?"

"That will do. And what would you say the Enlightenment was all about?"

"I had to write an essay on that. I'd call it a time when the intellectual people were trying to make God less and less important. Do you think I'm on the right track?"

"Go on."

"Before the Enlightenment the intellectuals based their thinking on the Bible. You know — God made man, man rebelled and messed himself up, God responded by calling Israel to be His people and later coming in person as Jesus — all that."

"Keep going."

"The intellectuals were trying to see the world as though — as though it just didn't make any *difference* whether those things happened. They thought they could figure out Truth without God. No, that's not right. Some of them

still believed in an abstract sort of God. But they thought they could figure out the Truth without the Bible — without knowing what *kind* of God He was, without knowing what He had *done,* without — without —"

"Yes?"

"I was going to say 'without getting the Big Story right,' but I didn't think it sounded very smart."

"Sarah, you must have had a good history teacher; it sounds very smart indeed, and my grad students couldn't have put it any better. Now, how did all that end?"

Sarah reddened. "I don't know, Professor T. My European history course ended in the nineteenth century."

I laughed. "How was it all *starting* to end, then?"

"Well, a lot of intellectuals were still optimistic about finding Truth without getting the Big Story right. But others were starting to say it wasn't working."

"Do you think it was working?"

"No. If it was working, they should have agreed with each other more and more. Instead they agreed with each other less and less. About everything. About what man is, what life means, how to live it, the works."

"If you understand that much, Sarah, then you'll understand what happened later."

"What?"

"A movement arose which said that we *can't* find Truth without getting the Big Story right."

"Oh, good."

"Now you'd think they'd be determined to get the Big Story right, wouldn't you?"

"Sure. Maybe even go back to the Bible."
"But here's the catch: Their deepest conviction is that *no one ever* gets the Big Story right. In fact they believe that there isn't any Big Story to *get* right. As the bumper stickers say in cruder language, 'Stuff happens.' That's all."

"And is that postmodernism?"

"Yes. For example, take the postmodernist slogan that you mentioned, 'suspicion of metanarratives.' The word 'metanarrative' is just fancy talk for 'Big Story.' So when someone says he's suspicious of metanarratives, he's just saying that no one ever gets the Big Story right."

"But Professor Theophilus — that makes sense in a way — I mean, now I understand what my teachers are talking about — but it's hypocritical!"

"Why?"

"Because if postmodernism is what you say it is, then postmodernism is a metanarrative! The postmodernists don't practice what they preach — they're only suspicious of everyone *else's* Big Story!"

"Just what do you think their Big Story is, Sarah?"

"Something like this. 'Once upon a time people believed there was a Big Story which would make sense of things if only they could get it right. Now we know better, because there isn't any Big Story, so no one gets it right.'"

"And what do you think of it?"

"Not much! How can anyone respect a Big Story that lies and pretends that it isn't a Big Story? I'd rather stick with a Big Story that admits it's a Big Story — like Creation, Fall, Redemption."

"I'm with you," I smiled. "Do you feel equipped now to return to the readings in your other courses and figure out what they're all about? You said you needed to find out what *kind* of nonsense postmodernism is, why *postmodernists* believe it, and how to *answer* it. Are you ready to get started?"

"I think so," she said. "I'm going to go back and study the assignments all over again."

"Good, but I want you to remember something. There is a grain of truth in postmodernism. Postmodernism thinks that everything is in pieces, that nothing hangs together. The grain of truth is that without Jesus Christ, everything *does* go to pieces, nothing *does* hang together — not truth, not life, not anything. You can't fight storylessness unless you remember that He is what makes the Story true."

"I'll remember," she said. "Thanks."

"The Real Issue: Discerning and Defining the Essentials of Postmodernism"

by: Stan Wallace

The university today is replete with opinions about postmodernism. Opinions that have diverse answers to questions such as: Where did postmodernism originate, and when? What defines it? How has it influenced our culture? How is it different from philosophies before it?

Christians in academia must carefully analyze the various opinions and seek a correct understanding of postmodernism to know how to relate to this intellectual movement.[1]

Though much is being written on the nature of postmodernism, it appears many of the analyses focus on what may be termed "accidental properties," or properties which do accompany much postmodern thought, but are not essential to the view. I will discuss some of these accidental features, touch on the difficulties which result from identifying these as necessary or essential features of postmodernism, offer what seem to be the necessary or essential features of postmodernism, and compare these to the essential commitments of the Christian worldview. The result should be an understanding of postmodern thought which allows one to embrace that which is laudable and avoid that which is amiss in the postmodernist view.

Many definitions of postmodernism are "historical" in orientation. Taking the reference to modernism in "postmodernism," the historical approach seeks to define postmodernity in terms of what it rejects of modernity. The most prominent feature of this approach includes the rejection of a modernist view of freedom, rationality and progress.

Rejecting Modernism

Concerning reason, postmodernists shun modernist views which inflate reason to the status of an entirely independent, neutral, unbiased and objective instrument with which truth can and will be found. Regarding progress, postmodernists are quick to point out that, contrary to the optimistic outlook of modernity, we are not "every day, in every way, getting better and better," but rather in some cases we are creating survival-threatening conditions by the unbridled rush toward technological "progress." The same is true in terms of views on freedom. Whereas modernity placed freedom and human autonomy as one of the highest values to be embraced, the

postmodernist suggests our freedom is an illusion. In fact, postmodernists maintain that our freedoms are determined by factors well beyond our control, be they race, gender, culture, or otherwise.

It seems clear that these features of postmodernity are in some ways commensurate with the Christian worldview. For example, we too reject the rationalism of modernity with its disdain for revelation or anything "scandalous" to reason. We would say that sin entails certain cognitive effects that diminish our reasoning capacity and make it a bit more suspect than modernity would admit. We would agree with postmodernists that "progress" is not always good, e.g., the fact that we *can* clone a human being does not mean that we *should* do so. And we agree human progress will not lead us to "utopia," which we say can be achieved only through life in and through the kingdom of God. Lastly, we agree that we are not ultimately free and autonomous beings. The words of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7:15 convince us of this: ". . . for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate." Hence as Christians we find at least some if not
a great deal of agreement and common-ground with the postmodernist on these issues.

However, some take these features to be the essential features of postmodernism, and seeing the parallels to the Christian worldview, they embraced postmodernism as fully compatible with the Christian worldview. This is a grave error, due at least in part to the assumption that these features are essential and not accidental elements of postmodernism. In fact, it becomes clear through inspection that the common points of postmodernism and Christianity derive from antithetical philosophical commitments which identify the essence of postmodernity and mark it off as essentially and deeply anti-Christian. To those essential features of the postmodern and Christian worldviews we now turn.

Perspectives of Reality

Foundational to each person's understanding of reality stands a "metaphysic." *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* defines metaphysics as ". . . the philosophical investigation of the nature, constitution, and structure of reality." A person's metaphysic ultimately defines and guides his or her thought, action, values, and so on. Underlying postmodernism is a metaphysic which ultimately unites all other strands of thought within that lineage, and as such may aptly be identified as the essence of postmodernism. This essential postmodern metaphysic maintains an unmitigated nominalism and the rejection of truth as correspondence to an objective, mind-independent world.

First, postmodernism is essentially nominalistic. This may be best understood by comparing it to the alternative: metaphysical Realism (hereafter simply "Realism").[2] Realism maintains that universals do exist, entities which are transcendent (i.e., exist apart from, or transcend the individual and culture), objective (not mind-dependent), and capable of being multiply-exemplified ("had" by more than one individual thing at the same time). This final point is often identified as the essence of Realism. Reinhardt Grossmann, using the property "whiteness" as an example, summarizes the position by stating:

Is the whiteness of the two billiard balls literally the same? Is there just one entity which is exemplified by both balls? Or does each ball have its own whiteness? This is the so-called problem of universals. . . . Philosophers who believe that the color of billiard ball A is the very same as that of billiard ball B are called *realists*. Those who deny this, are called *nominalists*.[3]

As examples of such universals, Realists point to moral values, natures, and propositions. Realism maintains that such things as goodness and justice exist and are transcendent, objective and multiply-exemplifiable. The same is true of human nature and propositions (such as the laws of logic), according to the Realist.[4]

In contrast, Nominalism maintains that no universals exist, but rather all that exists are particular, discrete things. Nothing is transcendent. Hence it follows that such things as moral values, human nature and propositions are created by the individual (or collectively by the society), not discovered as existent "out there." As such, they are not objective and absolute, but rather subjective, bound to the individual and/or culture for their existence and validity. We find this metaphysic echoing throughout the writings of the leading proponents of postmodernism. Concerning values, Michel Foucault writes, "The domination of certain men over others leads to the

differentiation of values; class domination *generates* the idea of liberty."[5] Concerning propositions, Jacques Derrida states, "The absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of significations infinitely,"[6] which echoes the words of Nietzsche: "There are no facts, only interpretations."[7] Again, in reference to natures, Foucault writes,

"Why does Nietzsche challenge the pursuit of the origin (*Ursprung*) . . . ? First, because it is an attempt to capture the exact essence of things, . . . because this search assumes the existence of immobile forms that precede the eternal world of accident and succession. . . . However, . . . there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that *they have no essence*."[8]

In sum, the nominalistic metaphysic of postmodernity denies the transcendence, objectivity and multiple-exemplification of moral values, natures and propositions. The important point here is that for the postmodernist there are *no* universals. Realists disagree as to just how many universals there are, but are in agreement that some properties exist as universals, as illustrated above. The postmodernist stands against this as a thoroughgoing nominalist: *there are no universals whatsoever*.

Is Reality "Out There"?

Furthermore, we may identify a second essential feature of postmodernism: the rejection of truth as "correspondence." On a correspondence view, a proposition (such as "snow is white") is "true" in virtue of it corresponding to the state of affairs in (mind-independent, objective) reality (snow really being white "out there" in the world). Such a view is squarely rejected by postmodernity. For the postmodernist, no appeal is made to an external "reality" beyond the individual and/or culture which ground a proposition as "true." Hence truth is ultimately grounded in the individual or culture. As Richard Rorty has stated,

Those who wish to ground solidarity in objectivity . . . have to construe truth as correspondence to reality. . . . By contrast, those who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity . . .view truth as, in William James' phrase, what is good for *us* to believe. *So they do not need an account of a relation between beliefs and objects called 'correspondence.'*[9]

In the words of Nietzsche, to whom many postmodernists look for inspiration, truth is

a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphismsin short a sum of *human* relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically and which after long use *seem* firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people.[10]

Foucault concurs, writing "The *forceful appropriation* of things necessary to survival and the *imposition* of a duration *not intrinsic* to them account for the *origin* of logic."[11]

Once understood, it is not difficult to see the ubiquity of this metaphysic in the outworkings of postmodern thought. While space does
not permit a detailed explanation, several examples should suffice to illustrate the point. Take, for example, the postmodern view of rationality. As a result of rejecting truth as correspondence to objective, mind-independent reality and thus asserting that reason and truth are individually or culturally determined, one can see why it is anathema to postmodernists for someone to assume to have "objective" truth. Such assertions are paramount to cultural imperialism, the violent imposition of subjective, cultural tendencies on others in order to conquer and subjugate.

The same is true concerning deconstructionism and the hermeneutics of suspicion: the greatest of all errors is to assume to have the one "true," "correct" or "preferred" interpretation of a text, for to do so is to assume truth is objective and knowable. Given the postmodern metaphysic, those who assume such an objective interpretation of a text has been obtained (or is even possible) must be motivated to claim as much due to political or social factors ultimately the desire to have power and authority over others. As Foucault summarizes,

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true . . . [12]

Furthermore, this postmodern metaphysic explains the motivation to reject metanarratives, which by definition are comprehensive worldviews understood to be the accurate and "true" understanding of reality. Such metanarratives as religious traditions (e.g., Christianity, Islam, Buddhism) and philosophical systems (e.g., Marxism, Humanism, Modernity) are to be unequivocally rejected due to their claim of having truth that transcends the individual, or culturetruth which can give one knowledge of reality as it is. These views are diametrically opposed to the postmodernist metaphysic. Jean-Francois Lyotard summarizes: "Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives."[13]

Finally, following from the rejection of an objectively-grounded human nature, it follows that one's personal identity must be grounded not in virtue of being human *per se*, but rather in terms of more narrow groupingssuch as ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. Similar examples of the outworking of this metaphysic are to be found in the various other doctrines often associated with postmodernism.

Philosophical v. Historical Analysis

In summary, I suggest a far more adequate definition of postmodernity is to be found via "philosophical" analysis, rather than "historical" analysis. In such a philosophical analysis we find two fundamental theses which underlie postmodernism and are the flower bed out of which the rest of postmodernist thought grows. As such, it is appropriate to identify these two metaphysical theses as the essential features of postmodernismthe necessary and co-sufficient conditions under which a view may appropriately be defined as postmodern. If they are consistently applied, one derives the other features of a postmodernist ideology. On the other hand, if one or both are denied, and a Realism regarding universals and/or a correspondence view regarding truth is embraced, the resultant view will clearly not be postmodern in nature. However, it is precisely in regards to these two commitments that postmod-ernism and the Christian worldview are at odds:

First, the Christian worldview clearly assumes Realism concerning values, natures and propositions. For instance, the moral rightness of loving God or acting justly are posited as truths which transcend individuals and cultures, and are multiply-exemplified throughout cultures and times (the *same* value can and has been exemplified by *many* people at *many* times). Likewise regarding natures: the Christian worldview assumes such a thing as human nature exists (for the incarnation was the taking on of something reala *real* human nature), and the nature assumed by Christ was the *same* nature as that of other humans, such that Christ was *truly* a human being and thus an equal and adequate substitute (as Hebrews 2:14 states, "Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by his death He might destroy him who holds the power of death.").[14] Also, the same may be said regarding propositions: the Christian worldview accepts these as universals. Such things as theological propositions (for example, regarding the nature of God) are taken to be true, not subjectively, but objectively, and multiply-exemplified (the *same* proposition had by many minds at one time so that inter-subjective communication is possible, and across time and cultures so that dialogue with those of other times and cultures is possible).

Second, a correspondence view of truth appears to be most consistent and even assumed by the Christian worldview. For example, propositions such as "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1) and "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day . . ." (I Cor. 15:3-4) are understood by Christians as being true, and true in virtue of their accurately describing the state of affairs in reality. As such, the Christian would assert that such propositions would be true even if no (human) minds ever entertained such propositions (e.g., surely God could have created the heavens and the earth without populating it with human knowers, in which case it would still be true that God created the heavens and the earth, but that truth would in no way be dependent on [human] minds.) Thus for the Christian, truth is not mind-dependent and hence subjective, but rather mind-independent and objective.

Therefore, having identified the essence of postmodernist thought and the Christian worldview we may conclude that (1) though there are points of common ground between the Christian and postmodernist views of the world that should not be ignored, (2) ultimately the Christian and postmodern metaphysic are diametrically opposed one to the other, and thus (3) we must be careful and reflective as we engage these ideas in the academy. The details of such engagement will be as varied as our disciplines and universities. Yet these fundamental metaphysical issues transcend the particulars of disciplines and universities, and as such give us a foothold: a place to begin the process of seeking to embrace truth and avoid error concerning these most important issues.

Notes

1 I wish to thank J. P. Moreland for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and the CLM leadership for the time to study in preparation for teaching and writing on this and related issues.

2 A third option often mentioned "between" these two positions is conceptualism: Universals transcend the particulars, though they exist universally only in one's mind as concepts. Yet in my view this option is ultimately reduced to a nominalistic view if these mental "universals" are taken to be nothing more than individual ideas which have no status outside the individual thinker (and hence are not multiply exemplifiable), or reduces to Realism if these concepts are taken to be entities with mind-independent status and are thus multiply-exemplifiable. Therefore, though there is a great deal of debate on these issues, for our purposes it is sufficient to identify Nominalism and Realism as the two options most germane to our attempt to define postmodernism.

3 Reinhardt Grossmann, *The Existence of the World: An Introduction to Ontology* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 12. See also James Porter Moreland, *Universals, Qualities, and Quality Instances: A Defense of Realism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985).

4 I have focused on those entities most widely agreed to be universals by Realists. There are other candidates, about which there is more debate concerning their status. These include colors (e.g., red), shapes (e.g., triangularity), aesthetic values (e.g., beauty) and numbers (represented by the numerals "1," "2," etc.).

5 Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Articles* (edited with and introduction by Donald F. Bouchard; trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), p. 150 (italics added).

6 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 280.

7 Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. Hollingdale, New York: Random House, 1968), p. 267.

8 Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 142. He goes on to state, "Nothing in mannot even his bodyis sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men." (*ibid.*, p. 153) (italics added).

9 Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 22 (italics added).

10 Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense," in *The Portable Nietzsche*, (selected and translated, with an introduction, prefaces, and notes, by Walter Kaufmann, New York: Viking Press, 1980), pp. 46-7 (italics added).

11 Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 150 (italics added).
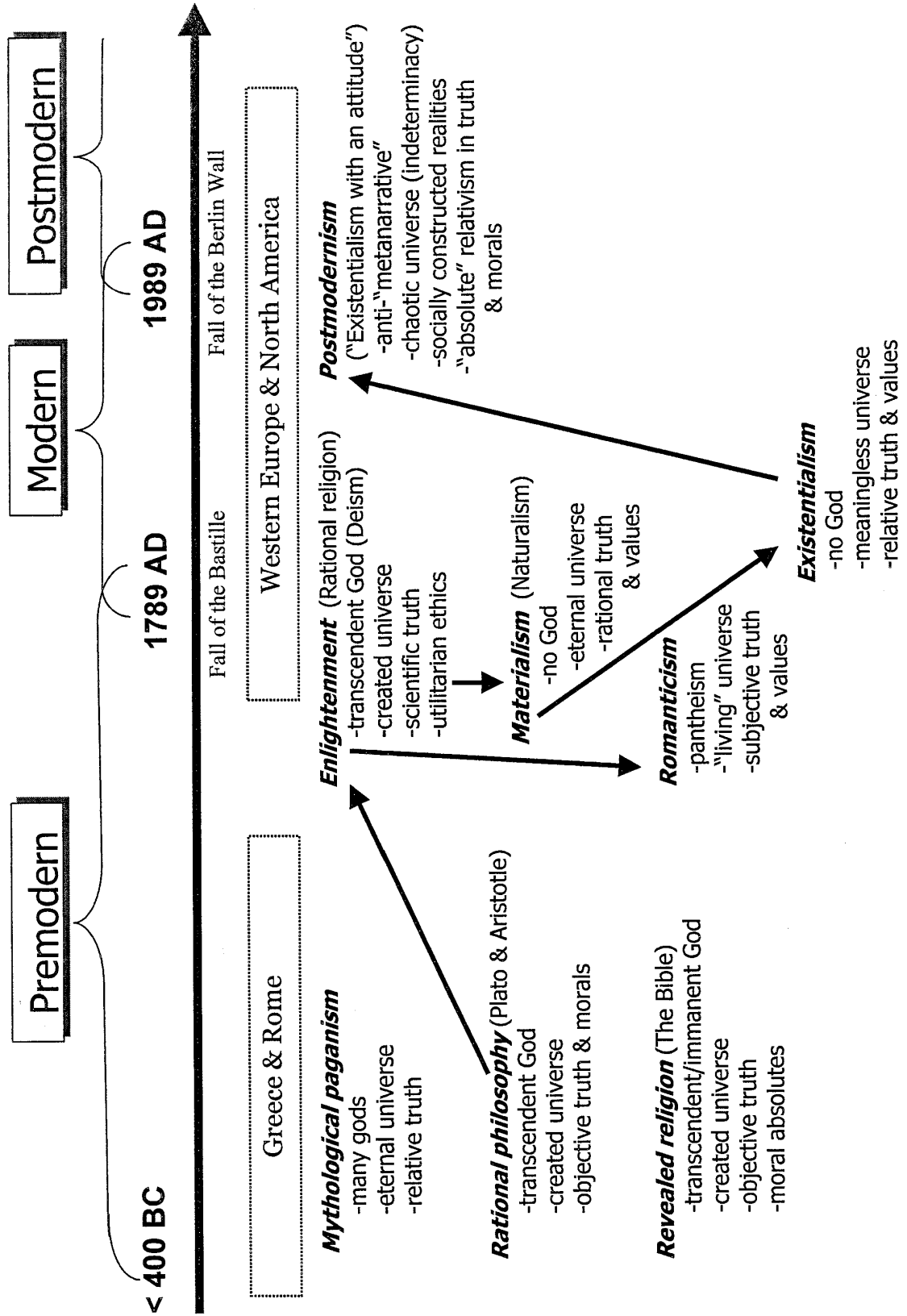
12 Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (edited by Colin Gordon, translated by Colin Gordon *et al.* New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 131. Elsewhere Foucault writes, "This demagogy [assumption of objective historical analysis], of course, must be masked . . . under the cloak of universals. As the demagogue is obliged to invoke truth, laws of essences, and eternal necessity, the historian must invoke objectivity, the accuracy of facts, and the permanence of the past." Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, p. 158.

13 Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi; forward by Fredric Jameson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

14 See also Philippians 2:7: Jesus "made himself nothing, *taking the very nature* of a servant . . . ." (italics added).

MAJOR MOVEMENTS IN WESTERN THOUGHT

Premodern	Modern	Postmodern

< 400 BC   1789 AD   1989 AD

Fall of the Bastille   Fall of the Berlin Wall

Greece & Rome   Western Europe & North America

Mythological paganism
-many gods
-eternal universe
-relative truth

Rational philosophy (Plato & Aristotle)
-transcendent God
-created universe
-objective truth & morals

Revealed religion (The Bible)
-transcendent/immanent God
-created universe
-objective truth
-moral absolutes

Enlightenment (Rational religion)
-transcendent God (Deism)
-created universe
-scientific truth
-utilitarian ethics

Materialism (Naturalism)
-no God
-eternal universe
-rational truth
 & values

Romanticism
-pantheism
-"living" universe
-subjective truth
 & values

Existentialism
-no God
-meaningless universe
-relative truth & values

Postmodernism
("Existentialism with an attitude")
-anti-"metanarrative"
-chaotic universe (indeterminacy)
-socially constructed realities
-"absolute" relativism in truth
 & morals

POSTMODERNISM – A "Whirled-view"

SOURCE	WRITINGS OF MARX, NIETZSCHE, LYOTARD, DERRIDA, FOUCAULT, RORTY
THEOLOGY	God is Dead
PHILOSOPHY	Anti-realism / Anti-foundationalism
SCIENCE	Chaos Theory
PSYCHOLOGY	Group Identity
ETHICS	Culturally-constructed values
SOCIOLOGY	Multiculturalism
LAW	Victim Group Empowerment
POLITICS	Power politics / Political Correctness
ECONOMICS	Anti-capitalism
HISTORY	Anti-metanarrative / Revisionist History
CULTURE	*Dadaism / Deconstructionism / Nihilism* *(Art) (Literature) (Movies/Music)*

From Aristotle to Derrida: The Intellectual Progression toward Deconstruction in Literary Theory and the Christian Alternative

By Dr. Whit Jones

The historical development of literary theory—the philosophy of what literature is, how it originates, what it accomplishes, how it relates to truth, and how it can be most fully enjoyed—throws significant light on the general relation between postmodern relativism and Christian faith. Looking at this historical development, starting with the great ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle and moving forward to twentieth-century deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, helps clarify how deconstruction in literary studies, along with related movements in contemporary thought and culture, is a fairly unsurprising result of a definite progression in worldviews that has occurred in Western intellectual history. Such a study also clarifies how and why Christian faith provides an anchor for truth and meaning that powerfully counteracts postmodern indeterminacy and serves as a basis for a vital, productive study of literature and the rest of the arts and sciences.

The first really important philosophical statement about what literature is and does comes in Aristotle's treatise *The Poetics*, written around 330 B.C. Writing about all imaginative literature, which in his day was always written in the form of poetry, Aristotle asserts, "Poetry [. . .] is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history; for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular" (IX). Aristotle's assertion of literature's philosophical superiority to history may be debatable, but it rests on major and, I think, very valuable assumptions about the nature of reality and imaginative literature's relation to it. Aristotle is presupposing the existence of objective, universal principles that determine human nature and govern the world we live in. He is not alone among classical thinkers in embracing this perspective. Harvard literary scholar Walter Jackson Bate writes, "[T]he foundation of the classical tradition is its confidence in a rationally *ordered and harmonious universe*, working according to fixed laws, principles, and forms" (4). Aristotle is also presupposing that the writer of literature is capable of discerning these principles or forms and accurately and powerfully representing them in his writings. The idea that literature is essentially an "imitation" (*mimesis*) of these truths of the real world outside literature is, in fact, one of the foundational concepts in this treatise.[20] It is the meaningfulness and order of the world that literature imitates, Aristotle clearly believes, that makes it possible for the literary work

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[20] See especially sections I-VIII in *The Poetics*.

itself to have its own organic form or structure (the literary form of tragedy is his focus in *The Poetics*). In his philosophy as a whole Aristotle pays relatively little attention to the source of these universal forms (significantly less attention that Plato gives the question). The concept of the "unmoved mover" that Aristotle articulates in his *Metaphysics*, a "final cause" of all things rather than a personal God (12.7.2-6), is as far as Aristotle goes in considering the supernatural. But this fact does not seem to weaken his confidence in the order of the universe and the literary writer's ability to represent or "imitate" that order.

This classical confidence remained the consensus view in Western literary theory for around two millenia. The greatest English literary theorists of the Renaissance and Enlightenment strongly affirm this position. In his *Apology for Poetry*, Sir Philip Sidney, influenced by both Christianity and Renaissance Neo-Platonism, does diverge somewhat from Aristotle. Where Aristotle seems to locate the universals the poet imitates in the natural world as it is, Sidney asserts that the poet must venture imaginatively beyond this world to represent the way things should be, to picture the sort of moral "perfection" that is no longer adequately displayed in our world because of "that first accursed fall of Adam" (106). Sidney clearly agrees with Aristotle, however, about the existence of universal truths and affirms the poet's ability, even as a fallen being, discern and exemplify these truths in his work in a "delightful" way that motivates people to live in accordance with them (108-14). Unlike Aristotle, however, the epistemological confidence that grounds Sidney's view of literature comes, at least in part, from his belief in a Christian God who "made man to His own likeness" and gave him a mind ("wit") capable of discerning truth (106).

The great English literary theorists of the Enlightenment—John Dryden, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson—evidence a similar confidence. Pope refers to the ordered cosmos humans inhabit as "Unerring Nature, still divinely bright, / One clear, unchanged, and universal light" (1.70-71). All good writing and valid literary criticism depend on this natural order, which is "At once the source, and end, and test of Art," Pope asserts (1.73). Dryden articulates the Aristotelian concept of literary imitation by calling drama (the subject of his treatise) "*A just and lively image of human nature . . . for the delight and instruction of mankind*" (141). Johnson's highest praise of Shakespeare's literary genius rests on this same concept. "Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers," he asserts, "the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirrour of manners and of life" (202). This Neoclassical assurance about the meaningfulness of our world and our literature rested in part on the belief in a Christian God, as Sidney's did. It also increasingly depended, however, on a

confidence in the independent power of human reason and empirical observation to discover the laws that govern all natural phenomena. Perhaps not for Dr. Johnson, but for many Enlightenment thinkers, influenced by the impressive scientific advances of the age, God became the great, withdrawn "clockmaker," who let the wheels of the created order turn by themselves—Some-One or Some-Thing who could be left out of the question of what constitutes the truth about human beings and their world and how that truth can be expressed.

The thought of the Romantic poets and theorists is primarily a reaction against Enlightenment thought, which seemed to the Romantics to be exalting analytical reason at the expense of feeling and other human faculties and to be emptying the world of spiritual meaning and mystery. Inevitably, the successes of science and technology and the industrial and commercial revolution that they were helping produce were leading thinkers to equate the true with the scientifically provable, the real with the material. The Enlightenment conception of the universal moral law—a law becoming increasingly divorced, in the minds of many of its adherents, from a vital relationship with a living God and increasingly connected, in the minds of its critics, with the businessman's profit motives—looked to the Romantics like an extremely barren, constricting ethos. "God is the supreme servant of men who want to get on, to *produce*. [. . .] The heavenly storekeeper. The everlasting Wanamaker," says twentieth-century Romantic D. H. Lawrence in his sardonic attack on the *Autobiography* of that quintessential Enlightenment rationalist, Benjamin Franklin (10).

It is hard to defend the permanent worth of literature, however, without reference to some sort of universal truth, and Wordsworth's "Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*" sounds surprisingly Neoclassical in its assertion of Wordsworth's attempt in his poetry to illuminate "the primary laws of our nature" (242). The Romantic theorists' conception of the individual poetic imagination, however, often seems to place this imagination beyond human or even divine reference. From this position it pierces beyond the physical world to find (or is it to create?) some sort of vaguely defined transcendental Presence. Shelley's "Defence of Poetry" relegates Christianity along with "all original religions" to the status of a subcategory of poetic inspiration (290). He says that the poet "participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one" (290) but provides no further definition of this ideal presence. His final claim that "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" (309) sounds very much like the sort of hyperbole that comes from insecurity. The world the Romantic poet legislates, one senses, is a world that gets smaller and smaller until it embraces only the individual poet's vagrant imaginings, unvindicated by any other source. Behind the strongest Romantic affirmations in theoretical essays and in poetry, it seems to me, there lurks

a kind of despair of ever connecting distant ideals with real life in this world or adequately representing those ideals in literature. American Romantic Edgar Allen Poe goes so far in "The Poetic Principle" as to relegate "the Beautiful"—the only goal properly pursued by the poet, he argues—to a category of human experience totally separate from the categories of "Truth" and moral "Duty" (354). This ungrounded Romantic individualism or subjectivity provides evidence that a movement has begun towards relativism in literary theory.

The New Criticism, a movement in American literary theory and pedagogy that dominated literary thought in this country in the 1930s and 40s and continued to exercise a strong influence on the way high school and college English teachers taught literature for decades more, tried to succeed in establishing objective criteria for the evaluation of literary excellence. New Critic Cleanth Brooks' preface to his brilliant book on the study of poetry, *The Well Wrought Urn*, makes it clear that a major part of Brooks' theoretical project is to counter "the temper of our times," which he characterizes as "strongly relativistic" (x). Yet Brooks tries to erect his objective standards for judging poetry largely without reference to any truth outside the poem itself. A generalization made by a poem, Brooks asserts in his famous chapter "Keats' Sylvan Historian," is not "meant to march out of its context to compete with the scientific and philosophical generalizations which dominate our world" (165). It is not to be studied or evaluated by "having to appeal to some outside scale of values" (257).

Certainly later scholars have at times oversimplified the New Critics' position on this score. In *The Well Wrought Urn* Brooks occasionally acknowledges some connection between the literary work and the truth about the world outside the work.[21] And New Criticism's assumption of a unified form or design in the best literary works always implied the existence of an author-designer, whose intentions the work to a greater or lesser extent reflected.[22] Brooks himself was a Christian, and I believe that his theory of paradox in poetry is based in part on his reading of Biblical paradoxes. Other New Critics, such John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren, were strongly influenced by the Bible-permeated Southern milieu in which they grew up and reacted to the skeptical national media's coverage of the 1925 Scopes Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, by helping write a defense of traditional, conservative Southern values—*I'll Take My Stand* (1930). Both Brooks and Ransom were ministers' sons. I think New Criticism is, in fact, based to a significant extent on its founders' beliefs in moral-religious

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[21] See, for example, his assertion that the beauty of Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn" "is based—what else is a poem concerned with?—on an imaginative perception of essentials" (104). Brooks never clearly defines, however, what these essential truths are or how the poem is connected with them.

[22] See Richard Levin's cogent affirmation of this point in "The Poetics and Politics of Bardicide" (491) and his "Reply" (133) to responses this 1990 *PMLA* article received.

absolutes, a worldview bolstered by their respect for or adherence to Christian faith. The New Critics never fully acknowledge this metaphysical debt, however, and in a conversation with me at a literature conference in Knoxville a number of years ago, Brooks stated that religious belief and the study of literature have nothing to do with each other. He also asserted that New Criticism is consistent with Aristotle's theory of literature, yet in deemphasizing a literary work's connection with the truth of the world outside itself, the New Critics undermine the crucial Aristotelian principle of imitation. New Criticism provides powerful tools for the close inductive analysis of the meaningful structure of a literary work, and its text-focused approach remains for me one of the most fruitful ways of understanding literature, from the standpoint of both teaching and personal reading. New Critical theory, however, undermines the cogency of its own practice, making its concept of literary form vulnerable to the later theoretical attacks that would be made on it and continuing the slide toward relativism in literary theory.

The archetypal criticism of Northrop Frye and the linguistic structuralism of critics such as Roland Barthes (at least the early Barthes) take the New Critical suspicion of truth standards outside the literary text a good deal further than the New Critics did. For critics such as Frye and Barthes, the structure of a literary work owes much more to the anthropology, communal psychology, or linguistic codes of the author's culture (little of which the author is fully aware of or able to consciously control) than to any intentions the author might have had or to any assertion about the truth of human life that the work might be making. Both of these later theoretical approaches still agree with the formalism of New Criticism in asserting the existence of objective, observable structures or patterns *within* literary works, but both go a step further than the New Critics in disconnecting them from any structure of meaning, truth, or intentionality *outside* the work.

Postmodern literary theory has tended toward the radical and extreme, as exemplified in the deconstruction first espoused in the late 1960s by Jacques Derrida. Derrida, in fact, refers to his theory in his seminal 1966 essay "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" as a radical break with the history of Western philosophy, a phenomenon that assumes "the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity" (510). Deconstruction or post-structuralism, however, actually represents a fairly logical extension of the thought of earlier theorists. Derrida is just exploiting the weaknesses that existed from the first in the positions of the formalists and structuralists. He makes the valid point that no structure has any permanent validity except in relation to a fixed point outside the structure with which that structure is somehow connected—

some stable "presence" with reference to which the structure has meaning or position or function. One cannot discuss the structure of a building, for example, without the concepts of bottom and top, upper and lower, which necessarily refer to such things as the ground itself and the gravity of our planet—things that exist *outside* the building. This idea of "being as presence," of a stable foundation outside language on which all of language and the cultural phenomena it participates in, including literature, can rest, has been given many names in Western culture, Derrida states, among which are "*telos*," "essence," "consciousness," "conscience," and "God." Such terms have never signified anything beyond themselves, Derrida asserts (496). He is thus unequivocally opposing theism and all concepts of human nature and language that have been built on assumptions of the existence of the divine or of objective truth and value. But the literary formalists and structuralists had prepared the way for such a conclusion by disjoining the study of language and literature from considerations of external meaning and truth. Agreeing with these earlier theorists' tendency to assert that these so-called literary structures are without external reference, Derrida concludes that they are therefore radically unstable, subject to innumerable inversions, rotations, transformations. They are not, in fact, structures at all (495-98). Rather than seeking verification from a source beyond the human mind and human language, Derrida asserts that there can be no such verification and that "freeplay" (495) is the only alternative for the theorist who refuses to engage in any sort of structuralist naiveté .[23] A reader who "plays" with the text in this way seeks to show only that every meaning that seems to be asserted, every pattern in the text that seems to be developing, is "always already" deconstructing itself into other, often contradictory, potential meanings based on the endless associations of "signs" (496). All of the word-signs we use in trying to communicate, Derrida argues here and elsewhere, are composed of phonemes (units of sound) and morphemes (units of meaning) that are defined by, and therefore imply, all other phonemes and morphemes in a linguistic field that has no connection with any world or truth beyond itself. The reader's and critic's highest function is simply to rejoice, in Nietzschean fashion, in the "play" of possibilities, of provisional assertion and counter-assertion, that the absence of meaning allows in any text, Derrida asserts (509).[24] There is no limit or

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[23] Claude Levi-Strauss, a structural anthropologist who comes to the edge of deconstruction but then backs away, is the example of such naiveté that Derrida uses extensively in "Structure, Sign, and Play"

[24] I'll give one brief example of the multiplicity of forms this deconstructive "play" takes. Nina Schwartz interprets Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in terms of Jane's continual pursuit of home and family and the kind of personal maturity that will allow her to have a happy home. According to Schwartz, however, the novel presents home in terms of a series of binary oppositions: home is both inherited and earned, something one must be born into and something one must strive for, something warm and fulfilling and something constricting and destructive. Rather than resolving these oppositions, Schwartz argues, the novel actually reveals only that each pole of the opposition is necessary for defining the other, that just

endpoint to this process, no place of stability. "The absence of the transcendental signified [the stable, present truth outside language to which earlier thinkers imagined that words referred]," Derrida states, "extends the domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitem*" (496). The attempts of the formalists and structuralists to make the study of literature as objective and scientific as possible has thus led, ironically, to the anti-scientific conclusions of Derrida, who is arguing that none of us, including the natural scientists, can know or assert anything at all about ourselves or our world, in literature or in any spoken or written discourse.

No one, of course, can live practically with the implications of Derridean post-structuralism. Therefore deconstructionists, along with those literary feminists, Marxists, new historicists, and cultural critics who use certain deconstructive assumptions or techniques as tools, contradict their own theory with every word they write or speak. If their own theory were true, there could be no theory of deconstruction or anything else. (This is the same sort of fallacy almost any sort of relativism runs into, of course.) Yet they go on reading papers as if their own meaning is somehow in the privileged place of not being subject to deconstruction, at least for a suitable period of time—long enough to get attention, applause, tenure, etc. And they often use very technical, scientific-sounding linguistic terminology (deconstructive criticism is very difficult to read) to support their assertions that all science and technique are meaningless. So at its best deconstruction involves its adherents in ridiculous self-contradictions. At its worst it becomes altogether petty and irresponsible—a garbled, pretentious verbal posturing, a route to triviality or unscrupulous power politics. (If none of us can mean anything, then the ones who yell the loudest and get the most people on their side win.) If deconstructive relativism represents any sort of real "play," it is the play of a bad child, who feels free to change the rules at any moment to suit himself.

To go beyond the hopelessness and foolishness of deconstruction, literary theory needs to return to Aristotle's belief that we live in an ordered world, a place where universal truth exists and can be known, and that the creative writer is capable of "imitating" the truth of this world. Such a return is not easy, however, in a world

when the novel seems to be asserting that home and family are a joy and fulfillment, it is simultaneously asserting that home is a place of limits and loss, that one is able to bear life in any home only by imagining a better home elsewhere (heaven, in St. John Rivers' vision). But this better home's blessings also depend on its inadequacies for their meaning (or non-meaning), so that the alternation between the vision of home as blessing and home as curse never ends in the novel. One vision is "always already" being replaced by the associated opposite vison. For example, Jane's apparent loving home with Rochester at the novel's end depends on the exclusion of Rochester's daughter Adèle from that home, Schwartz asserts, so that the loving home is actually defined in terms of hostility and isolation. All of Jane's attempts to find a loving home only reveal that the search for home never ends or that any "home" one finds always disintegrates into unstable oppositions between nurturance and destructiveness. Charlotte Bronte's Christian vision of a young woman's growth toward fulfillment and maturity becomes, in the hands of a deconstructionist, a vision of a non-person going no-where.

as confused and jaded as ours, where not only are myriad postmodern thinkers in the liberal arts, the social sciences, and even jurisprudence joining Derrida in debunking the idea of a knowable cosmos or a permanently meaningful text but even the physical scientists sometimes generate chaos theories rather than descriptions of natural laws. The last period in Western culture when people generally seemed capable of belief in an Aristotelian vision of physical and metaphysical order was the Enlightenment. Maybe the slide toward the relativism really began there, when people began believing in truth and morality without believing in or taking seriously the God who is their source, when they began placing human reason above faith in God.[25] Perhaps the the weakness that Derrida exploits goes all the way back to Aristotle's essentially godless classicism. Believing in Aristotle's vision that our world is informed by universal truth seems to require, paradoxically, a final step beyond Aristotle—faith in a personal God (not an impersonal or undefined "mover") who is the origin of all truth and order, the One who began the conversation that all human discourse continues and responds to, the ultimate Poet. In the Christian view, this God has spoken to man through sacred scripture and provided the unequivocal "sign" of His "presence" by entering our world as the incarnate Word, the *Logos* (John 1.1).

As absurd and troubling as deconstruction and related forms of postmodern thought are, therefore, they may, ironically, have created a situation in which Christian faith has become one of the last intellectually defensible and existentially tenable positions from which to defend a belief in the permanent meaningfulness of literature or life. The attempt at rational objectivity that leaves out the divine subject has proven vulnerable. Increasingly, the only ones who can still believe in literary imitation, who can find truthful and beautiful forms in literature and know why, may be the ones whose reason is grounded in faith, whose life is a conversation with God.

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[25] Weaknesses in systems that base everything on unaided human reason were suggested as early as the work of nineteenth-century skeptical philosopher David Hume. In his 1944 essay "Is Theology Poetry?" C. S. Lewis points out that naturalists cut the ground out from under their own theory by staking everything on human reason and then arguing that reason is only a set of physical, biochemically determined events (139).

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The Postmodern Crackup

From soccer moms to college campuses, signs of the end.
By Charles Colson with Anne Morse

Is postmodernism—the philosophy that claims there is no transcendent truth—on life support? It may be premature to sign the death certificate, but there are signs postmodernism is losing strength:

I spoke at my alma mater, Brown University, in June, arguing that without acknowledging moral truth, it's impossible for colleges to teach ethics. I've been saying this since the late 1980s, all over America, and I've yet to be successfully contradicted. Whenever someone claims *his* alma mater teaches ethics, I ask him to send me the curriculum, which invariably turns out to be pure pragmatism, utilitarianism, or social issues like diversity and the environment—good things, but not ethics. At Brown—one of the most liberal campuses in the country—I was shocked when the professor who introduced me acknowledged that he could no longer teach ethics, adding: "Chuck Colson will explain why."

In Red Wing, Minnesota—a town Al Gore carried in 2000—the majority of high school students consider themselves prolife. As one sophomore put it, "I think it would be better to overturn *Roe v. Wade*."

According to *The New York Times*, kids aren't inheriting these attitudes from their prochoice (and horrified) parents. But they are reflecting national trends. Among the young, support for legalized abortion dropped from 48 percent in 1993 to 39 percent today. Clearly, this generation, witnessing the dreadful legacy of abortion, isn't buying prochoice claims.

In recent years, Americans have become increasingly tolerant of homosexual rights. But in the wake of the Supreme Court's *Lawrence* decision, which many believe paves the way for gay marriage, support for gay causes dropped sharply. Why? Because while it was fashionable to consider ourselves tolerant, *Lawrence* jolted us back to reality—back to an understanding of how destructive it would be if we overturned the definition of marriage as a union between one man and one woman.

Soccer moms—a constituency that worried about abortion rights, good schools, and civil liberties, are now called security moms because these days they worry primarily about their kids' safety. *Time* magazine recently quoted one mother who said she normally chooses political candidates who strongly support welfare and abortion. But since September 11, she said, "All I want in a President is a person who is strong."

September 11, theologian Michael Novak says, was the beginning of the end for postmodern preeminence. People are beginning to realize postmodern presuppositions simply don't work.

And what are those presuppositions? Postmodernists claim we can have no "grand metanarrative" that makes sense of reality. Since there's no such thing as truth, all principles are merely personal preferences. As professor Ed Veith explains, the postmodernist claims that all you can do is try to impose your preferences on others before they impose theirs on you.

But then came September 11, the day terrorists imposed *their* preferences, murdering 3,000 innocent Americans. If one's worldview is true, it has to conform to reality—to our real-life experiences. Post–9/11, few Americans could continue believing that there's no such thing as moral truth, no such thing as good and evil.

These encouraging signs—that Americans are recognizing the flimsiness of postmodernism's presuppositions—afford a great opportunity. I believe people today can be attracted to a belief system that is rational and defensible. The question is, Who or what will fill the vacuum if postmodernism collapses?

Christianity offers a belief system that is, as Paul tells Festus, "true and reasonable." I can't think of a more critical time for pastors, scholars, and laypeople to be grounded in a biblical worldview and to defend it clearly to those hungering for truth.

But are we prepared for such a challenge? George Barna recently completed a tour of American churches and came back with a dismaying report that most church and lay leaders—90 percent, according to one survey—have no understanding of worldview. How are we going to contend with competing philosophies if we're not even rooted in our own truth system?

Ironically, just as there seem to be encouraging signs in the culture, there are also signs that the church is dumbing down, moving from a Word-driven message to an image- and emotion-driven message (note how many Christian radio stations have recently converted from talk and preaching to all music).

It would be the supreme irony—and a terrible tragedy—if we found ourselves slipping into postmodernity just when the broader culture has figured out it's a dead end.

(From BreakPoint, December 9, 2003, reprinted with permission of Prison Fellowship. www.breakpoint.org)

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