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POSTMODERNISM:
A CHRISTIAN REFLECTION

For more than a decade we have increasingly seen and heard the terms "postmodern" and "postmodernism" both inside and outside academia. I recall first coming face-to-face with "postmodernism" several years ago when the *Utne Reader*, a sort of *Reader's Digest* of what it calls the "alternative press," devoted a large portion of one issue to the subject.[1] Gradually, I came to realize that other terms that I was increasingly hearing--"deconstruction," "post-structuralism," "metanarrative," "authorial-authority," " reader-response," and "thick narrative"--were, in one way or another, related to the larger movement called postmodernism. As one whose principle interest is intellectual history, I recognized that I needed to gain an understanding of this movement.

Discussions with colleagues, some of whom were attracted to postmodernism, impelled me to further study and reflection. When asked to present a formal lecture on the subject in 1995, emphasizing postmodernism's impact on the humanities, I was forced to focus my attention more clearly, to "do my homework," so to speak. Asked to address postmodernism today, I have once again had to concentrate on the issue, hopefully expanding my understanding beyond that of a few years past and at the same time building on what I had done previously.

I do not come to you today as an "expert" on postmodernism. The literature of and on this movement is vast; some of its jargon is deliberately off-putting. Therefore, I cannot claim to have more than sampled some representative works, but I believe that I have sampled sufficiently to gain a fairly accurate sense of postmodernism's main themes. In any case, my description and critical analysis should be regarded as an interim report of a traveler who has stopped at a few ports while he determines the best path into the mainland. And, I need to note in speaking to this international audience on European soil, I examine postmodernism as it has manifested itself in the English-speaking world, particularly the United States. In the discussion that follows, I will be interested to hear how postmodernism as I describe it in America relates to intellectual trends elsewhere.

The term "postmodernism" is admittedly vague and may mean different things to different people. Historian Peter Novick, for instance, comments that the word has been used "so promiscuously and with such varied and contradictory meanings that it has been emptied of content." But, he further observes, "the locution is symbolic of a circumstance of chaos, confusion, and crisis, in which everyone has a strong suspicion that conventional norms are no

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[1]"Postmodernism and beyond . . .," *Utne Reader* (July/August 1989), 50-76.

longer viable, but no one has a clear sense of what is in the making."[2] Today I am going to focus on that sense of chaos and confusion, especially as it relates to the issue of epistemology, the question of how we know what we claim to know, for that seems to be the common-denominator element of postmodernism, no matter who is writing or speaking. I will try to describe briefly the major sources of postmodernist thought: Friedrich Nietzsche, Ferdinand de Saussure, Martin Heidegger, the Frankfurt school, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. While I can give little more than thumbnail sketches of these ideas as they relate to postmodernism, I shall try to be as accurate as possible. Second, I will offer some general characterizations of postmodernism, particularly as they relate to the humanities. Third, I will give my current--admittedly tentative--assessment of postmodernism. In this assessment, I will speak both as someone concerned with the nature of scholarship in the humanities and as a Christian who is equally concerned with the relationship of his faith to that scholarship and to contemporary thought patterns.

Intellectual foundations of Postmodernism

To speak of postmodernism assumes that there is something called modernism. Briefly, modernism refers to the Western cultural movement that emphasized reason and expressed itself most fully through science. Philosophers such as John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and G. W. F. Hegel sought to understand the world on the basis of reason. Francis Bacon and Isaac Newton shaped modern science as empirical in methodology and rational in interpretation, regarding physical reality as operating on the basis of natural laws. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment sought to apply reason and science to all of reality, what postmodernists pejoratively refer to as the "Enlightenment Project." In the nineteenth century, efforts were made to turn history into a science through the discovery of historical laws. Auguste Comte founded the discipline of sociology for the purpose of studying society according to scientific principles. Karl Marx sought to base revolution upon a scientific understanding of human economic behavior. The twentieth century has witnessed the further development of this scientific endeavor across the academic disciplines. But it has also brought environmental degradation, totalitarianism in the name of science, two world wars using the most advanced technology, and atomic destruction.[3] It is no wonder that a reaction arose against reason and science. The most recent of these reactions is postmodernism.

Although I have seen the postmodernist outlook traced back to David Hume, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, and even to St. Paul, most accounts regard Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) as the father or forerunner of this movement. It was Nietzsche who introduced the mad man announcing that God was dead. With God dead, there was no longer any fundamental basis to things, no foundation. Modern Western civilization faced a crisis,

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[2]Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 524.

[3]For excellent surveys of modern Western thought, see Franklin L. Baumer, *Modern European Thought: Continuity and Change in Ideas, 1600-1950* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1977); and Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 248-445.

Nietzsche believed, although it did not yet recognize the gravity of the situation.

The death of God, the dissolution of the foundations upon which Western culture rested, offered an immense opportunity, in Nietzsche's view, if only man would grasp it. "Instead of lamenting the absence of a world suited to our being, we invent one," Alan Megill summarizes Nietzsche's outlook. "We become the artists of our own existence, untrammeled by natural constraints and limitations."[4]

Two related concepts flow from Nietzsche into postmodernism. First, the German philosopher challenged all systems of truth and morality as tyranny, praising instead those thinkers original and brave enough to offer alternatives to existing value systems. And yet these oppositions have significance only as forces of dissolution, for there can be no legitimate new system to replace the old, no culmination or closure, only a continual process of creation and destruction, "a circuitous journey without return, a crisis without resolution, a dislocation without reintegration."[5]

This challenge to dominance rests upon Nietzsche's belief that we human beings have no access to reality, his second major influence on postmodernist thought. Knowledge of things as they actually exist, whether ourselves or external reality, is impossible. What we think of as knowledge is instead a human creation, an illusion or artistic construct. The language through which we express our knowledge is a self-contained world, entirely separate from reality and purely arbitrary in its formation. Language development "'did not . . . proceed on logical lines,'" Nietzsche wrote, "'and the whole material in which and with which the man of truth, the investigator, the philosopher works and builds, originates, if not from cloud cuckoo land, at any rate not from the essence of things.'"[6]

What we call truth, therefore, is a human construct that speaks only to our "aesthetic apprehension"[7] of reality rather than reality itself. This view applies not only to humanistic knowledge such as philosophy and literature but scientific knowledge also. In brief, language and reality are the same thing. For Nietzsche "the truth of language is *in* language, not outside it." Megill concludes. "Language is a prison from which escape is utterly impossible."[8] To ask how correct our language is or the ideas it conveys are, is to pose an irrelevant question.

Nietzsche's view of language received further support from Ferdinand de Saussure (1859-1913), who understood language as a system of mutually defining signs. According to Saussure,

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[4]Alan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 34.

[5]Megill, 19.

[6]Friedrich Nietzsche, "On Truth and Falsity in an Extra-Moral Sense," trans. M. A. Mügge, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, vol. 2, ed. Oscar Levy (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964), 179; quoted in Magill, *Prophets*, 51.

[7]Megill, *Prophets*, 51.

[8]Ibid., 95.

"Language is a structure, a functioning whole in which the different parts are determined by one another. In fact, no linguistic sign means anything by itself: it only acquires value by being distinguished from other signs in the language."[9] Saussure's understanding strongly influenced the structuralist school that emerged in France in the 1930s under the leadership of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908--).[10]

Meanwhile, Nietzsche's notion of a cultural crisis resulting from the death of God provided the starting-point for Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), who has been described as the most influential philosopher of the twentieth century.[11] From the mid-1920s on, Heidegger was consumed with the problem of "nihilism," defined as "living within a state of crisis, within a present that is absolutely derelict."[12]

Influenced by Nietzsche, Heidegger abandoned the representational understanding of language that appeared in his first major work, *Being and Time*. Now he concluded that the meaningless void could only be faced meaningfully through the creative power of the word. "The Word alone gives Being to the thing,"[13] he wrote. "In the naming, the things are called into their thinging. Thinging, they unfold world, in which things abide and so are abiding ones."[14] In brief, language creates the reality that we know. Furthermore, "It is not we who create language, but language that gives itself to us. On such grounds there is no difference between language and reality."[15]

Heidegger differed from Nietzsche in two important respects. First, he was genuinely interested in art, particularly poetry, and built much of his understanding of language from artistic examples. Secondly, he held a mystical, perhaps even religious, stance toward language. Rather than analyzing language, he ultimately wanted to experience it and through that experience come into contact with Being, which will ultimately transform us.[16] But both thinkers

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[9]Alvar Ellegård, "Study of Language," in *Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, Publishers, 1973), 672.

[10]Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 2-3; Anthony Woodiwiss, *Postmodernity USA: The Crisis of Social Modernism in Postwar America* (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 148-49.

[11]Megill, *Prophets*, 128.

[12]Ibid., 118.

[13]Ibid., 166.

[14]Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated and with an Introduction by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 199-200; quoted in Ibid., 168.

[15]Megill, *Prophets*, 169.

[16]Ibid., 177-78.

were united in the belief that through their language humans create reality.

Another German source for postmodern thought was the "Frankfurt school," composed of individuals associated with the Institute for Social Research, founded at the University of Frankfurt in 1923. Theodor Adorno (1903-69) and Max Horkeimer (1895-1973) seem to have been the first to describe the Enlightenment as authoritarian.[17] They argued that Enlightenment reason translates the specific, material world into abstract concepts and thereby shapes the way we know that world. For example, mathematical consciousness sees the world as mathematical. By then demanding that everyone see the world in these terms, because this is allegedly the "true" nature of the world, Enlightenment thought becomes totalitarian. As Thoms Docherty describes it, knowledge then becomes "a power over the consciousness of others who may be less fluent in the language of reason. Knowledge thus becomes caught up in a dialectic of mastery and slavery in which the mastered or overcome is not nature but rather other human individuals. . . . From now on, to know is to be in a position to enslave."[18]

In the post-World War II period, a number of French thinkers who rebelled against the dominance of structuralism, which posited an objective universal-mental code underlying all human cultures, were attracted to the ideas of Nietzsche and Heidegger. Often called "post-structuralists," writers such as Michel Foucault (1926-84) and Jacques Derrida (1930--) objected to structuralism's assumption of a stable code "The new movement implies a shift from the signified to the signifier," Madan Sarup writes, "and so there is a perpetual detour on the way to a truth that has lost any status or finality. . . . Post-structuralism, in short, involves a critique of metaphysics, of the concepts of causality, of identity of the subject, and of truth."[19]

In this rebellion against structuralism, Foucault is most fully Nietzsche's heir. Like his forerunner, Foucault regarded the order of things--past, present, and future--as necessarily degraded and the function of the intellectual to be their constant opponent. Because knowledge is a part of any given order's attempt to control and subject, it too must be undermined. "There is no such thing as 'objective' knowledge. . . . Any claims to objective knowledge, to valid theory, are merely attempts to exercise power of one sort or another."[20]

As with Nietzsche, Foucault put forward no goals. Just as thought liberates one from the

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[17]Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972). Originally published in 1944.

[18]Thomas Docherty, "Introduction," in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 5.

[19]Sarup, *Introduction*, 3. It should be noted that structuralism and post-structuralism have much in common. Norman Cantor, for instance, identifies three such commonalities: 1. the system rather than the individual has the ultimate reality; 2. language systems provide the fundamental mental structures; 3. deep structure operates in both the conscious and unconscious realms. See Norman F. Cantor, *The American Century: Varieties of Culture in Modern Times*, Picture Essays by Mindy Cantor (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 449-50.

[20]Megill, *Prophets*, 195.

present order, it creates a new oppressive order to replace the old. "Given the enslaving tendencies of all thought, all interpretation, all discourse, and all language, one is finitely justified in opposing all orders."[21] Norman Cantor writes that "for Foucault all moral affirmations disintegrate into thrusts for power and manipulative domination. There is no ethical system that rises above the corrosive force of total moral relativism."[22]

Knowledge must be expressed through language, but language, Foucault argued, is only discourse--words and ideas interacting with other words and ideas, not--in the representational sense--with things in themselves. Because we live only in this world of discourse we can, of course, challenge an existing discourse with an opposing discourse. Therefore, Foucault sided with excluded or marginal groups, particularly homosexuals, to subvert the existing order. But if one of these marginal groups was to become dominant, he would ally himself with another marginal group to oppose it.

All discourse, however, whether of the dominant or marginal is fictional in the sense that it creates its own reality. There is no such thing as truth in terms of an accurate representation of an external reality. Everything is interpretation and whatever interpretation is dominant holds it position because of power. There is no natural order with which we humans are to achieve harmony. Our task is simply to attack the realm of power.

Jacques Derrida, as with Heidegger and Foucault, is preoccupied with language. Because we have no immediate vision of reality, the thing in itself, we are dependent upon speaking and writing. As with Nietzsche, Derrida believes that this situation offers us a great opportunity, because "writing and interpretation come to be valued not because they can reveal to us the light of truth but because they are themselves truth."[23] The death of god allows us, indeed requires us, to work out our own meaning.

But Derrida goes far beyond Nietzsche in asserting that the very meanings we work out are themselves ambiguous, inconsistent, and contradictory. He, therefore, proposed "deconstructing" texts, analyzing "all aspects of language, including metaphors, the etymology of words, symbols, inadvertent puns, Freudian slips." Such deconstructive reading shows that the text does not contain any self-evident meaning. "Derrida's aim, . . . " Allan Megill comments, "is a systematic dismantling of message sending structures."[24] Indeed, there are "infinite meanings in the text . . .," observes Norman Cantor. "There is . . . a structural impossibility of imposing a finity and a fixity, or a conclusion, to textual signification."[25]

In fact, Derrida is attacking what he calls the "logocentric" Western tradition, the entire effort of the West to penetrate the meaning of things through words organized into a rational

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[21]Ibid.

[22]Cantor, *American*, 464.

[23]Megill, *Prophets*, 305.

[24]Ibid., 332.

[25]Cantor, *American*, 455-56,

pattern. Such an effort, he seeks to show, is impossible, indeed foolish. Because texts do not say what their authors intend them to say, we may interpret the text in any manner we wish.[26] The goal is simply to interpret. "The manipulation of words and letters" is "something close to an end in itself." In short, for Derrida, there is nothing beyond the letter, no primal voice speaking a long-concealed truth.[27]

Of course, to have even attempted this brief exposition of Derrida is to contradict his principles, for--as he would say--what he has written does not "mean" anything. Instead, what he is trying to do is show--not explain--the game of interpretation and through showing engage us in the game, drawing us into a play of words, associations, and sounds, among other things, that will be so satisfying in itself that we will have no urge to search for meaning and truth.

Although there are important differences among these various thinkers, they laid the philosophical foundations for postmodernism. We might identify three primary contributions. First, human beings have no access to reality and therefore no means of perceiving truth. Second, reality is inaccessible because we are caught up in a prison-house of language that shapes our thought before we think and cannot express what we think. Third, through language we create reality and thus the nature of reality is determined by whoever has the power to shape language.

Interestingly, American academics became interested in French post-structuralism about the time that it went out of style among French intellectuals. As Richard Pells notes, writers who emerged in the 1970s, such as Alain Finkielkraut, André Glucksmann, Philippe Sollers, and Julia Kristeva, "were now less skeptical than their postmodernist predecessors about the objectivity of language or the virtues of rationality. They were also more centrist politically, more enthusiastic about democratic institutions and individual freedom, and more tolerant of bourgeois society. . . . And they were often appalled by the obsession with multiculturalism and political correctness in America's universities."[28] But American academics seized on the ideas of Derrida and Foucault, among others, because they gave a vocabulary to support the empowering of marginal groups, provided a theoretical base for attacking "Eurocentrism," and--not insignificantly--"promised to create more jobs for and enhance the stature of America's professors--on campus, if not in the outside world."[29] In doing so, these academics helped create what we know as "Postmodernism."

Postmodernism and the Humanities

Postmodernism as a recognized intellectual movement began in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Some scholars have identified specific dates for its starting point--favorite events include

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[26]Whether Derrida, despite statements to this effect, really meant that the critic could interpret however he or she wishes is a matter of debate among commentators. See Sarup, *Introduction*, 52.

[27]Megill, *Prophets*, 316.

[28]Richard Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated, and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 317.

[29]Ibid., 316-17.

the 1968 student rebellions, particularly in Paris, France, and the 1972 dynamiting of St. Louis, Missouri's Pruitt-Igoe housing project, a prime example of modernist city planning and architecture that was ultimately judged a complete failure.[30] But I am doubtful that one single year or event can adequately map the movement of ideas.

In the handouts you can see two characterizations of postmodernism. Looking over these lists, one is struck by the emphasis on the changing, illusory, and fragmentary nature of our knowledge. Hans Bertens writes, "In practically all recent concepts of Postmodernism the matter of ontological uncertainty is absolutely essential. It is the awareness of the absence of centers, of privileged languages, higher discourses, that is seen as the most striking difference with modernism."[31] In one of the most famous and influential statements on postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard contrasts modern thought's "explicit appeal to some grand narrative," with postmodernism's "incredulity toward metanarratives."[32] As a result, knowledge can no longer be regarded as dealing with a stable reality. As Thomas Docherty writes, "Epistemology is contaminated by history,"[33] for our position within the cultural milieu shapes our minds..

Often referred to as anti-foundationalism, this position arises out of the understanding of language as a self-containing reality, an ongoing interplay of signifiers that have no contact with an external reality. Thus Jean Baudrillard can say that we must allow "for all the possible interpretations, even the most contradictory--all are true, in the sense that their truth is exchangeable."[34] And, reflecting Foucault and Derrida, Zygmunt Bauman says, "Truth is, in other words, a *social relation* (like *power*, *ownership*, or *freedom*): an aspect of a hierarchy built of superiority-inferiority units; more precisely, an aspect of the hegemonic form of domination or of a bid for domination-through-hegemony."[35] Hence, postmodernists frequently speak of "privileged" texts, ideas, and language, whose importance, they believe, arises not out of inherent qualities but from hierarchical power relationships. Lyotard, for example, writes of science's

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[30]See, for example, Charles Jencks, "The Post-Modern Agenda," in *The Post-Modern Reader*, ed. Charles Jencks, Academy Editions (London: St. Martiin's Press, 1992), 24; and Docherty, "Introduction," in *Postmodernism*, ed. Docherty, 35.

[31]Hans Bertens, "The Postmodern *Weltanschauung* and its Relation to Modernism: An Introductory Survey," in *A Postmodern Reader*, eds. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 64.

[32]Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, with a Foreword by Fredric Jameson, Theory and History of Literature (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiii-iv.

[33]Thomas Docherty, "Introduction," in *Postmodernism*, ed. Docherty, 24.

[34]Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Postmodern Reader*, eds. Natoli and Hutcheon, 355.

[35]Zygmunt Bauman, "Postmodernity, or Living with Ambivalence," in Ibid., 11.

dominant role in Western civilization as a form of "cultural imperialism."[36]

Because it sees truth as a symbol or expression of power, postmodernism emphasizes what it often calls the "Other," marginal groups such as people of color, women, homosexuals, and third-world peoples who can challenge the "center" or locus of power. In one typical postmodernist statement, Henry Giroux asserts,

> In challenging the notions of universal reason, the construction of a white, humanist subject, and the selective legitimation of high culture as the standard for cultural practice, postmodern criticism has illuminated how Eurocentric-American discourses of identity suppress difference, heterogeneity, and multiplicity in its efforts to maintain hegemonic relations of power."[37]

Giroux therefore calls for a politics of otherness and a curriculum of otherness that challenges racism, sexism, and other forms of domination.

Because there is no foundation to any knowledge, postmodernism favors a pluralistic understanding of truth. Architectural critic Charles Jencks writes of "the end of a single world view and, by extension, 'a war on totality,' a resistance to single explanations, a respect for difference and a celebration of the regional, local and particular."[38] Saying much the same thing, but from a different angle, Thomas Docherty states that the world lives "at different speeds, in different times, in different places. In short, there is not one world (nor even three), but rather many; all being lived at different rhythms, none of which need ever converge into harmony."[39] Postmodernism seeks, therefore, to incorporate this very heterogeneity into its approach to the world.[40]

Beginning as early as the 1960s, these views cut a wide swath across the academic disciplines in the United States. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*[41] prompted a contextual or external understanding of the scientific process. Nelson Goodman, Hillary Putnam, and Richard Rorty led the attack on foundationalism in philosophy. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz approached culture as a text while his younger colleagues regarded their ethnographic work as "negotiated" and "constructed." In psychotherapy, Roy Schafer offered the "narrative method" as a means to construct a second reality. The Critical

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[36]Lyotard, *Postmodern*, 27.

[37]Henry Giroux, "Postmodernism as Border Pedagogy: Redefining the Boundaries of Race and Ethnicity," in *Postmodern Reader*, eds. Natoli and Hutcheon, 467.

[38]Jencks, "Post-modern Agenda," in *Post-Modern Reader*, ed. Jencks, 11.

[39]Docherty, "Introduction," in *Postmodernism*, ed. Docherty, 18.

[40]Jim Collins, "Post-modernism as Culmination: The Aesthetic Politics of Decentered Cultures," in *Post-Modern Reader*, ed. Jencks, 96.

[41]Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Legal Studies movement, as represented by Morton Horwitz and Robert Gordon, sought to relativize and deligitimatize legal consciousness through the use of history and literary criticism.[42] The new interdisciplinary field of "Cultural Studies" regarded all aspects of society as an interconnected whole to be studied as "signifying practice."[43]

But with its emphasis on language, it is not surprising that postmodernism has probably experienced its greatest expression in literary criticism. In a general sense, the very fascination with theory that pervades contemporary literary scholarship illustrates the postmodernist belief that everything is interpretation. But particular approaches to literature more clearly illustrate the postmodernist trajectory.

Stanley Fish has been a leader in the approach to literature known as "reader-response" theory. In his book *Is There a Text in This Class?* he recounts the development of his thought. In contrast to the modernist assumption that a literary text has a fixed identity which it is the job of the critic to uncover, Fish first argued that the text has a structure that is the same for all readers but that the work's meaning lies in the reader's experience. But after further examination, he determined that it is the reader who decides what formal patterns are important. Later, he found that the reader supplies the formal patterns. Finally, he concluded that the reader does not act independently but is a member of an interpretive community which shapes the way the reader reads the text. "The claims of objectivity," he says, "can no longer be debated because the authorizing agency, the center of interpretive authority, is at once both and neither [the text or the reader]."[44] Another pioneer in reader-response criticism, Norman Holland, argues that "readers respond to literature in terms of their own 'lifestyle' (or 'character' or 'personality' or 'identity.'"[45] While in Holland's view the text does limit the range of possible interpretations,[46] the reader largely determines its meaning.[47]

Other critical schools, including formalism, semiotics, deconstruction, feminism, and neo-Marxism, have also in various ways decentered the author and the text. The critic pursues criticism as another art form--as one text interacting with other texts--because it is no longer possible to identify the "meaning of the text in reference to any generally valid criterion of value,

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[42]Peter Novick surveys the impact of anti-objectivism on academia in *Noble Dream*, 523-72.

[43]See "Symposium: Intellectual History in the Age of Cultural Studies," *Intellectual History Newsletter*, 18 (1996), 3-69.

[44]Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 4-5.

[45]Norman Holland, *5 Readers Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 8.

[46]Ibid., 12.

[47]Ibid., 17.

knowledge, and truth."[48] As Norman Cantor comments somewhat humorously, "All canons may be scrambled, all texts are subject to reevaluation, and their meanings are open to perpetual reconsideration. Derrida offers unlimited horizons for busy literary critics; no wonder they love him."[49]

Such a theoretical approach underlies the attacks on the so-called "canon" of Western literature. While some critics simply want to expand the canon to include "other voices," namely women and ethnic minorities, others have attacked the very notion that the classics are in any way superior works. They have been considered classics, it is argued, simply because a white, male, heterosexual power structure has posited them as such. As Catharine R. Stimpson argues, the "canon" is the product of "historical forces, circumstances, choices, and accidents, not of that tradition's 'intrinsic excellence.'" Thus, "Krazy Kat" cartoons as well as the neglected writings of women and African-Americans are now considered worthy of study.[50] In fact, Andreas Huyssen identifies the effort to collapse the distinction between high and low (or mass) culture as the most significant trend within postmodernism.[51]

The discipline of history was slower to respond to the postmodernist impulse, partly because historians have traditionally been uninterested in the discipline's theoretical underpinning. Hayden White, however, in his book *Metahistory* argued in the early 1970s that considerable similarity existed between literature and history in both form and purpose. Furthermore, he downgraded the role of evidence, saying "one must face the fact that, when it comes to the historical record, there are no grounds to be found in the record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning rather than another."[52]

Other historians, particularly those working in cultural and intellectual history, picked up this theme. Dominick LaCapra described the historian as one in dialogue with the past, deciding "what deserves to be preserved, rehabilitated or critically transformed in tradition." Along with Lyotard, who challenged the possibility of metanarratives or all-inclusive interpretations of history, LaCapra questioned the effort to find "closure, undivided origins, coherent structure, determinate meaning." Not surprisingly, LaCapra was much influenced by Foucault and Derrida

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[48]Robert Weimann, "Textual Identity and Relationship: A Metacritical Excursion into History," in *Identity of the Literary Text*, eds. Mario J. Valdes and Owen Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 282.

[49]Cantor, *American*, 457.

[50]Catharine R. Stimpson, "Is There a Core in This Curriculum? And Is It Really Necessary?" *Change: the Magazine of Higher Learning* (March/April, 1988), 28.

[51]Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," in *Post-Modern Reader*, ed. Jencks, 47, 51.

[52]Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation," in *The Politics of Interpretation*, ed. W. J. T. Mitchell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 136-37; quoted in Novick, *Noble Dream,* 601.

and published frequently in journals of literary criticism. He and others of his school of thought increasingly describe historians as "inventing," " imagining," "creating," and "constructing" the past.

As in literary study, historians increasingly have sought to bring new voices and perspectives--African-Americans, Native Americans, women, homosexuals, non-elite classes such as workers and storekeepers, peasants, and colonized peoples--into their accounts. They have frequently pursued the theme of oppression, particularly in connection with the spread of Christianity and Western colonialism. Beyond simply bringing in new voices, however, historians also now seek to decode language to reveal the relationships of power and gender or the psychological elements that lie behind events. And similar to some literary critics, they seek to topple historical hierarchies, arguing such things as "when the history of menarche is widely recognized as equal in importance to the history of monarchy we [social historians] will have arrived"[53] or that "Mickey Mouse may be more important to an understanding of the 1930s than Franklin Roosevelt."[54]

Commenting on the debate raging over these new thrusts in historical scholarship, feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott both describes the postmodernist approach to history and applies its methodology. "The knowledge we produce is contextual, relative, open to revision and debate, and never absolute," she writes. "There is no denying the partiality and the particularity of the stories, and, by extension, of all stories historians tell. It is finally the plurality of stories and of the subjects of those stories, as well as the lack of any single central narrative that conservatives find intolerable because it undermines the legitimation of their quest for dominance." [55]

We must recognize that postmodernism is not all of one piece, that while on the one hand some argue that scholarship is fiction, others suggest that there is a connection between our knowledge and the real world. In other words, there are both more radical and more conservative versions of postmodernism, or what David Ray Griffin describes as "Destructive" (characterized by absolute relativism, the impossibility of objectivity, and "unrelieved flux") and "Constructive" (which emphasizes shared truths or values and "common sense" notions) postmodernism.[56] But this very pluralism within the postmodernist mindset suggests the movement's fundamental nature. "Properly speaking . . . there is no 'postmodern world view,' nor the possibility of one,"

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[53]Peter N. Stearns, "Coming of Age," *Journal of Social History*, 10 (Winter 1976), 250.

[54]Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 103.

[55]Joan Wallach Scott, "History in Crisis? The Others' Side of the Story," *American Historical Review*, 94 (June 1989), 690.

[56]David Ray Griffin, *Varieties of Postmodern Theology* (Albany: State Univeristy of New York Press, 1989), xi; described in Carl F. H. Henry, "Postmodernism: The New Spectre?" in *The Challenge of Postmodernism: An Evangelical Engagement*, edited by David S. Dockery (Wheaton, IL: Bridgepoint, 1995), 38-40.

writes Richard Tarnas. "The postmodernist paradigm is by its nature fundamentally subversive of all paradigms, for at its core is the awareness of reality as being at once multiple, local and temporal, and without demonstrable foundation."[57]

Responding to Postmodernism

How shall we respond to postmodernism? Clearly it challenges nearly all the concepts that have guided our civilization for four hundred years or more. Its spread throughout academia and the general culture demands that we take postmodernism seriously. Although I am a mere historian, not a philosopher, I offer the following comments to what should be an on-going discussion within the Adventist community.

First of all, it appears that postmodernism contains within itself a number of self-contradictions, of which many postmodernists themselves are aware. Although, as we have seen, most postmodernists assert that we have no contact with reality and therefore cannot establish truth, this argument itself puts forward a truth statement about reality. "Any attempt to speak from a 'place' is immediately rendered problematic by the fact that one of the positions central to postmodernism is that there are no places left from which to speak," writes Barbara Creed. "There are no 'Truths,' 'Beliefs,' or 'Positions.' Yet, this is in itself a position and one now in danger of becoming a new orthodoxy."[58] A sympathetic Marxist critic says much the same thing: "Their [postmodern] authors made the precise claim that *their* words, if no others, were verifiably accurate depictions of what they referred to, whether the latter objects were aspects of language, literature, kinship systems or modes of production."[59]

Also, in its belief in crisis, its historical account of the passage from modern to postmodern, and its critique of the "Enlightenment Project," postmodernism writes its own metanarrative of Western culture[60] that does not take into account the very pluralism it believes lies at the heart of the historical process. Romanticism, traditionalism, and Christianity have all both challenged the supremacy of reason and have played important roles in shaping our culture, yet they seem to disappear amidst the "Enlightenment Project" paradigm postulated by postmodernists.

Finally, despite its denial of absolutes, postmodernism's concern with dominance and oppression reveals its own set of moral absolutes. Terms such as "tolerance," " justice," and "democracy" appear frequently in postmodernist writing as moral values by which to judge existing society. But in Thomas Docherty's words, the postmodern ethic demands that "we must

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[57]Tarnas, *Passion*, 401.

[58]Barbara Creed, "From Here to Modernity: Feminism and Postmodernism," in *Postmodern Reader*, eds. Natoli and Hutcheon, 416.

[59]Woodiwiss, *Postmodern*, 149. See also Keith Yandell, "Modernism, Post-Modernism, and the Minimalist Canons of Common Grace," *Christian Scholars' Review*, 27 (Fall 1997), 20.

[60]Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994), 235-36.

judge. . . . Yet we have no grounds upon which to base our judging."[61] If we cannot know any absolutes, however, there seems to be little reason other than preference to choose these particular values and, if preference determines our values then those values lose their moral force.[62]

These internal contradictions of postmodernism support the view held by many scholars that rather than being a new world view--or anti-world view--postmodernism is in reality the logical conclusion of modernism.[63] If this is so, not surprisingly postmodernism still holds dear some of modernism's values, even if it has undercut the bases of those values.

In addition to these internal contradictions, postmodernism also poses some practical problems. Although most postmodernists believe that language separates us from reality, it appears that this view does not adequately account for the totality of human experience. Allan Megill, a sympathetic historian of postmodernism, draws our attention to this difficulty. "One can call everything 'illusion' if one wishes, just as one can call everything 'discourse' or 'text.' But this does not abolish the distinction between, say, an interpretation of the experience of being run over by a truck and the experience itself--a distinction which every language, if it is to function on something other than a purely fantastic level, must somehow accommodate."[64] In other words, there is some connection between language and external reality that postmodernism does not seem to properly acknowledge. Andreas Huyssen seems to turn postmodernism on its head when he comments that its view "has led to the privileging of the aesthetic and the linguistic which aestheticism has always promoted to justify its imperial claims."[65]

An example of the problem of the relationship between language and reality in postmodernist scholarship appears in the work of feminist historian of science Evelyn Fox Keller, who argues that modern science must be understood as the product of a privileged male hierarchy. Nonetheless, she puzzles over the fact that this gendered knowledge has worked so well. "Whatever philosophical accounts we might accept," she writes, "the fact remains that the particular vision of science that men like Bacon helped articulate has, over the course of time, more than fulfilled Bacon's prophecies, yielding a kind and degree of power that surpasses his

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[61]Docherty, "Introduction," in *Postmodernism*, ed. Docherty, 26.

[62]See Diogenes Allen's comments on the role of personal preference in "Christianity and the Creed of Postmodernism," *Christian Scholars' Review*, 23 (December 1993), 123; and Roger Lundin's argument that rather than being morally neutral, postmodernism presents a morality of absolute self-interest, in "The Ultimately Liberal Condition," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life* (April 1995), 23.

[63]See, for example, Huyssen, "Mapping," 60-61; and Cantor, *American*, 449-54.

[64]Megill, *Prophets*, 42.

[65]Huyssen, "Mapping," 60-61.

wildest dreams. Science as we know it works exceedingly well."[66] Rather than suggest that science works because it approximates to some extent external reality, however, Keller argues that we need "a better understanding of what it means to say that science 'works,' above all, of what it is that science 'works' *at*. What is needed is a reexamination of the meaning of success."[67]

It appears to me that Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, in their book *Telling the Truth About History*, more adequately describe the nature of scholarship. They call for an understanding of knowledge that gives attention to both its conditionality and its contact with external reality. "Practical realists," as they describe themselves, emphasize the "function of words in articulating the multifarious contacts with objects. Communicative and responsive, words serve the goal of truth-seeking exactly because they are not the arbitrary tools of solipsists. Grammar may be deeply embedded in the human mind, but words result from contact with the world."[68] These objects of the external world, like Megill's truck, place constraints on what we think and how we act.

Another, and I believe the most important, practical problem posed by postmodernism is whether a functioning society or civilization can be built without a foundation or absolutes. One of the foremost American postmodernist philosophers, Richard Rorty, argues that in a world where truths do not and cannot exist, all we need is mutual tolerance.[69] But I wonder if mutual tolerance is of sufficient moral force when such a society is challenged either within or without by dissenting voices who put forward a different vision, perhaps one based on absolutes. Is mutual tolerance sufficient to motivate future generations to maintain a civilization with no surer foundation than preference? As my questions imply, I am doubtful.

The questions I have posed thus far have been purely secular in character. But as Christians we also must take postmodernism seriously. Some Christians have seen postmodernism with its interest in the "Other," its concern for a plurality of voices, and its rejection of the domination of reason and science as presenting a more favorable situation for Christianity. Arthur J. DeJong, for instance, states that postmodernism "emphasizes openness and diversity, it reintroduces awe and mystery. While it does not demand transcendence, it allows, perhaps even suggests, transcendence."[70] While to some extent this statement is correct, it also appears to be naive. The reason postmodernism allows awe, mystery, and transcendence

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[66]Evellyn Fox Keller, "Gender and Science: 1990," in *The Great Ideas Today 1990* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1990), 88-89.

[67]Ibid.

[68]Appleby, *Truth*, 248.

[69]Richard Rorty, "The Independence of Intellectuals," *The Journal of Philosophy*, 80 (October 1983), 584-88. It should be noted that Rorty denies being a relativist.

[70]Arthur J. De Jong, *Reclaiming a Mission: New Directions for the Church-Related College* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 99.

is because it accepts no account as truthful or, to put it in other terms, all accounts are equally truthful. Christianity, it appears, can be allowed into the discussion or discourse only if it drops any claim to absolute truth.

As Christians we can agree with postmodernism that our knowledge is limited, that reason is an inadequate path to the absolute, that all of us think from historically conditioned positions, and that language both shapes and confines thought. After all, Paul stated that "we see through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12). Christian philosopher Merrold Westphal sees no incompatibility between Foucault and Derrida, on the one hand, and Christianity, on the other. "Postmodernism can be seen as an extended meditation on several Pauline themes whose repudiation all but defines modernity," Westphal writes.[71] But this compatibility requires, it appears to me, that we "tame" these thinkers, that we eliminate the very radicalness that makes them significant and interesting.

We need not, however, follow Nietszche, Foucault, Derrida, and their postmodernist disciples into an epistemological black hole. The Christian doctrine of creation, which posits that God created both the world and our minds suggests that there is some degree of correspondence between the two. George Marsden points out that both postmodernists and Christians agree that naturalism, which put God out of the picture, "left modern scholars . . . up a creek without an epistemic paddle." But unlike the postmodernists, who accept this situation as a starting point for their philosophy, "Christian scholars . . . begin with God's creation as an organizing premise for understanding what they observe. . . .", Marsden writes, "In such a theistic framework, we have reason to suppose that God would have created us with some mechanisms for distinguishing truth from error, however darkened our hearts and puny our intellects."[72] Another approach to epistemology on the basis of the creation doctrine appears in the work of Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh. Addressing the postmodernist criticism that Enlightenment rationalism seeks knowledge for the purpose of power, they propose what they call a "relational epistemology," emphasizing that although we translate the created world into human terms as we study it, we listen rather than control, recognizing that God made a world of which we are stewards. While we can have a degree of confidence in our knowledge, we use that knowledge

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[71]Merrold Westphal, "The Ostrich and the Boogeyman," *Christian Scholars Review*, 20 (December 1990), 2. For another statement of this position see Merrold Westphal, "Faith Seeking Understanding, " in *God and the Philosophers: The Reconciliation of Faith and Reason*, ed. Thomas V. Morris, 221. Roger Lundin criticizes this view in *The Culture of Interpretation: Christian Faith and the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 205-11. Additional sympathetic evaluations of postmodernism by evangelical Christians are Gary John Percesepe, "The Unbearable Lightness of Being Postmodern," *Christian Scholars' Review*, 20 (December 1990), 18-135; and Mark S. McLeod, "Making God Dance: Postmodern Theorizing and the Christian College," Ibid., 21 (March 1992), 275-92.

[72]George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 88.

with a sense of responsibility to the God who made it possible. [73]

The issue is that as Christians we believe in an accessible absolute reality, although we approach its deepest truths through faith rather than reason and recognize that both offer only limited understanding Gene Edward Veith observes, "Modernists would argue in various ways that Christianity is not true. One hardly hears this objection any more. Today the most common critique is that 'Christians think they have the only truth.'"[74] In contrast to postmodernism's denial of metanarrative and advocacy of the plurality of truths, Christians believe that the "*petit-histoire*," to use Lyotard's terminology, of Jesus' birth, crucifixion, and resurrection not only actually occurred but is itself the key element in the metanarrative of earth's history, what Adventists call "the Great Controversy." Furthermore, Christians assert that our personal relationship to this totalizing story determines both the meaning of our lives on earth and our individual eternal destiny.[75]

The problems I have indicated should not be interpreted to mean that we must reject postmodernism out of hand. We Christians are undoubtedly and inescapably influenced by the culture in which we live. But, especially as educators, we also must strive to be counter-cultural, to stand outside both modernism and postmodernism, recognizing that the theories we use in our academic study may have implications for our faith and that our faith may have implications for the theories that we adopt. Therefore, we must evaluate these ideas critically and identify carefully points of agreement where dialogue can begin. For instance, postmodernist concepts such as the limitations of reason, acceptance of non-rational paths to knowledge, and concern for justice, among other features, can provide common ground for conversation. Christian philosopher Larry Harwood observes that postmodernist rejection of reason offers an opportunity for the hearing of the Christian message.[76] We must test the waters to determine whether this is indeed so.

To accomplish this task, Allan G. Padgett urges Christian academics and other Christian intellectuals to become a "'critical dialogue partner'" with postmodernists, but yet maintain our identity as Christians. Creatively using postmodernist terminology and concepts, he writes that

> Christians, therefore, must develop their own theologically motivated and faith-full hermeneutics of suspicion to deconstruct *différance* and undo the negativity of French post-structuralism. . . . Christianity must pass through both the acids of modernity and the suspicion and negativity of post-modernity into its own healthy self-conception of self-in-community-with-the-Other. This healthy self-conception in community will focus

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[73]Middleton and Walsh, *Truth*, 167-71.

[74]Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 19.

[75]See J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 84.

[76]Larry D. Harwood, "Was Rationalism Christian or Modern?" *Christian Scholars' Review*, 27 (Fall 1997), 12-13.

> especially on God as Other but will also include Neighbor and Fellow-Creature as Others.[77]

We enter this dialogue with our postmodernist friends and colleagues knowing that our discourse is not just intertextual--to use postmodernist terminology--but is built upon faith in the God who revealed himself to us both through the written Word and the "Word become flesh."

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[77]Alan G. Padgett, "Christianity and Postmodernity," *Christian Scholars' Review*,26 (Winter 1996), 132.

POST-MODERN: A KNOWING CRITIQUE OF "CREDIBLE" KNOWLEDGE

Anti-Liberal Epistemology:
- "The Search for order," Function, Adjustment
- Transcendent claims for schooled rules, mental forms, humanistic purpose
- Rational propositions: argument, motive, intent, character
- Fitting in, engineered systems: structure & function
- Continuity boundaries space & time
- Ideal Models: a-historical laws, rules, claims for "Science"

Anti-Idealism: Apriori Mental Structures
- Kant-Cassirer vs. Hume: Apriori characters human mind
- Culture of Symbolic Forms: Mediate, Organize the Imagination
  - [Science, Religion, Aesthetics, Mythology]
- Discourses and "epistemes": Kant=conscious, intentional

Anti-Authority
- All generalizing categories, Meta-theory and meta-narratives
- Single unified "coherent" plots
- Causal-linear analysis
- Problem-solving predictions

Critical of:
- "Centering": Domination, Hierarchy, Coherence
- "Totalizing": "Objectivity" ("Really"--out there)
- Universalizing classifications: taken for granted
- Representations in formal knowledge

All constructed P-M knowledge is "Soft": "Phenomenal"
- "The Center Does Not Hold": Protean
- Particularistic, Pluralist, pragmatic: a radical empiricism
- Concrete, spontaneous, evocative detail
- Subjective, contextual (imperfectly predictive)
- Cult-like, journalistic, fictitious
- Significance of the aberrant case, anomaly, deviant, the misfit
- Perversity

Games playing: P-M Performances
- About Power (Politics) and Social-Cultural Positioning: Race, Gender . . .
- Strategy, tactics, maneuvering: endless
- Spectacle, lying, deception

Criticism of the P-M Critique: Puerile
- Exhaustively polysemic, rhetorical, metaphoric
- "No Respect": debunking, nihilistic
- A Pleasure (hedonism) in the violent-shocking-outrageous-profane
- A Cerebral detachment: flight from the "serious"
- Surface shallowness, no enduring values
- Intellectually slothful, self-indulgent, self-destructive
- Mental narcissism

Burton J. Bledstein, posting to H-Ideas, October 31, 1994.

Modernism	Postmodernism
Romanticism/Symbolism	'Pataphysics/Dadaism
Form (conjunctive, closed)	Antiform (disjunctive, open)
Purpose	Play
Design	Chance
Hierarchy	Anarchy
Mastery/Logos	Exhaustion/Silence
Art Object/Finished Work	Process/Performance/Happening
Distance	Participation
Creation/Totalization	Decreation/Deconstruction
Synthesis	Antithesis
Presence	Absence
Centering	Dispersal
Genre/Boundary	Text/Intertext
Semantics	Rhetoric
Paradign	Syntagm
Hypotaxis	Parataxis
Metaphor	Metonymy
Selection	Combination
Root/Depth	Rhizome/Surface
Interpretation/Reading	Against Interpretation/Misreading
Signified	Signifier
Lisible (Readerly)	*Scriptible* (writerly)
Narrative/*Grande Histoire*	Anti-narrative/*Petite Histoire*
Master Code	Idiolect
Symptom	Desire
Type	Mutant
Genital/Phallic	Polymorphous/Androgynous
Paranoia	Schizophrenia
origin/Cause	Difference-Differance/Trace
God the Father	The Holy Ghost
Metaphysics	Irony
Determinancy	Indetermancy
Transcendence	Immanence

Ihab Hassan, "Representing the Postmodern," in *A Postmodern Reader*, eds. Joseph Natoli and Linda Hutcheon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 280-81.