

DESCRIBING THE STORM

CHAPTER SIX

New framework thinking has also had a powerful influence on the way in which our University and College teachers look at language. This was made clear in an article by John Barach which originally appeared in *Christian Renewal* (Vol. 13, No. 1). It is used here by permission.

Return to Babel

So you came to school to study stories? You will still do that—though not as much as you might have hoped—but stories are studied in the light of theory. Such has always been the case—any book review or any book about literature is based on a theory about literature—but critical theory has never been emphasized as much as it is today.

Critical theory dominates the university English department, and has spilled over into many other departments as well. At first, it may seem irrelevant to those outside the university: “I don’t particularly care what some professor in a university says about Shakespeare or Dickens!” But ideas do not stay confined to the university setting, and the new critical theories are particularly potent, for they are ideas about language.

In the past, critics used to believe that a text had a meaning, that a reader could figure out what the author intended to say, that there were objective standards to use in studying texts. Even if no one could figure out a piece of, say, Browning’s poetry, it was assumed that the author meant something by it (or that it was nonsense).

All that has changed. The traditional critical theory has been laid aside long ago. Indeed, a couple of changes have taken place. The New Criticism—already quite old—declared that we should just examine the structure of the poem. John Donne’s religious sonnets would be examined for rhyme, rhythm, line structure, and so forth, but the theology and the historical context would be largely overlooked. But both the traditional criticism and the New Criticism have been overthrown by postmodernism and deconstructionism.

Postmodernism and Deconstructionism¹

Deconstructionism is a theory about language. Language, they say, shapes reality. We cannot think apart from language of some sort. Everything we perceive through our senses, everything we claim to know about the world around us and about truth, is shaped by language. Each person does not develop his own language. Rather, language develops in a society; language is a social construction. Deconstructionists point out the arbitrary nature of language. There is no reason why the letters d.o.g. should refer to a four-legged hairy creature (nor why they should correspond to the sound “dog”). The deconstructionists claim that language is learned in a social context: you learn to identify the sound “dog” with the letters d.o.g. and both with the animal itself because your society did so.

In fact, the deconstructionists claim that everything is language of a sort. The words on this page are certainly language, but so are the clothes that you wear, the car you drive, the house you live in, and so on. We cannot escape from language. Everything is a text, and so critical theory that was developed for literature is now applied to all of life.

Gene Edward Veith summarizes the view: “As human beings, we are unable to step outside the boundaries of our language; we cannot escape its limits or its demands. Since language is bound up with our culture, it is largely beyond our control, and we cannot truly even think for ourselves. To a large degree, our language thinks for us. There is no ‘transcendental logos,’ no objective meaning, no realm of absolute truth that exists beyond the bounds of our human language. To use another postmodernist slogan, we are incarcerated in a ‘prison house of language’” (Veith, 53).

More than that, language is a prison house developed by society. Societies claim that language communicates truth, that words reveal truth. But all such claims to universal truth are oppressive. Societies use language to

further their own goals and aims, to impose them upon the readers and speakers of a language.

Postmodernism, then, is a revolt against foundations and against truth. It opposes Christianity, which depends on God as its Foundation, but it also attacks modernism with its various foundations—human reason, the material world, the scientific method, or whatever else.

To reject foundations, however, is to reject truth. Truth cannot be distinguished from fiction, the postmodernists say. All of life is narrative. All of life is a story, and it is a story told in language drawn from a society.

In the past, people believed and sought worldviews, ways of looking at life, that were true and were universally applicable. Worldviews are, in the postmodernist jargon, “metanarratives,” stories about stories. Once again, they come in the language of a society. Any such claim to universal truth—a “totalizing discourse” in the postmodernist jargon—is an attempt at oppression on the part of the society that produced the “metanarrative.”

If all language springs from a society that is, by its very nature, oppressive, then we must attack language itself. The deconstructionists do so. Language is unstable, they say. It is self-contradictory. After all, whenever we think of freedom we must also think (a little bit, at least) of slavery. Whenever we say man we exclude woman. Besides, no author can ever have exactly the same context as a reader, so no reader can ever determine exactly what an author means by each word.

Moreover, the deconstructionists practice a “hermeneutic of suspicion.” Societies use language to further their goals. Whenever we read anything, then, we must look to see how the author is serving the goals of his society. We must suspect the author of trying to oppress us into accepting his view of reality. Behind Shakespeare lurk racism, sexism, patriarchy, and Christianity. Likewise, even the basic definitions of words reflect the biases of society: “wolf” has a bad connotation and “dog” a good one simply because society likes tame animals and dislikes wild ones.

Deconstructionist theory, then, argues that no meanings are correct. There is no right reading of a text. (A variation called “reader response theory” says that all readings are correct—which is really the same as saying that none are.) Indeed, we are told that we should overthrow the traditional readings of the text, readings which reinforce the oppressiveness of the text. The traditional reading of *King Lear* sees Lear as the tragic hero, cruelly treated by his wicked daughters. But it is possible—and good—to read it as a play about feminist daughters who overthrow their oppressive father.

Postmodernism enters other fields, too. History is not objective. There are only various stories about what happened in the past, and none of those stories is authoritative. None is true; none can be distinguished from fiction. Thus we see constant attempts at revisionist history, rewriting history from the perspective of blacks or women or homosexuals (Veith 50). Truth no longer matters. All that matters is how well the view stands up, how widely it is accepted.

The results of this theory have not been and will not be confined to the university campus. They are being taught to children in elementary schools. The “whole language” method is not a neutral tool in a teacher’s toolkit. It is closely tied in to deconstructionist theory. Children are not to be expected to get meaning from texts; rather, they are to create their own meaning as they read.²

Deconstructionism is seen in the law courts. Judges feel free to depart from the actual text of a law or an act and make decisions based on their subjective reading of that law or act. Thus, although Alberta’s Individual Rights Protection Act does not name “sexual orientation” as a protected category, judges rule as if it were covered.

The results of deconstructionism and postmodernism are also seen in the “political correctness” movement. Various “oppressed” groups are now attempting to shape language. What can you do if all language is determined by society, and if societies are always oppressive? You try to gain enough power to be the one determining meaning. You try to shape language so your view comes out on top. Now the “oppressed” are becoming the oppressors. A leader in the new critical theory, Stanley Fish, recently published an article entitled, “There is No Such Thing as Free Speech and it’s a Good Thing, Too.”³

There are political results, too. It is not at all surprising to learn that the forerunner of the modern critical theory, Heidegger, was a Nazi. In fact, one of the leading Harvard deconstructionists, the late Paul de Man, was a Nazi collaborator in his youth. After abandoning his wife in Brazil, he came to the United States, remarried, and taught at Harvard. Later, he invited Hans Robert Jauss, a former S.S. officer, to lecture on literary theory.⁴

Deconstructionism and postmodernism declare that language is developed by a society and that all societies necessarily are oppressive. People's views are always determined by the group with which they are identified, and whose use of language shapes their own thoughts (think of all the "subcultures" that fill North American society). Moreover, the existing structure of society needs replacement. There are no moral standards as a basis for a new structure; there is only power. Postmodernism may claim to reject totalitarianism and fascism, but it is in fact a recipe for it.⁵

Defending the Faith

Postmodernism is not modernism, and it is not the kind of individualistic relativism that one often encounters. One might say that postmodernism calls for a new kind of apologetic response. Really, however, what is needed is nothing more than consistent biblical apologetics.

The "old" apologetics that must be replaced argued on the basis of common ground between the believer and the unbeliever. The Christian and the non-Christian shared a belief in foundations, though they differed on what the ultimate foundation was. The modernist may have placed reason as his ultimate foundation, and many Christian apologists allowed him to do so. Beginning with man's reason, they attempted to prove the existence of God and eventually to displace the old foundation (reason) with a new one (God).

The postmodernists have shown that the modernists—and all unbelievers—have no foundations. Why should reason be the foundation? After all, logic is a Western invention, part of the language by which Westerners communicate, a product of Western society. Making logic central is oppressive, especially to those from the East, but also to women (modern critical theory holds that logic is patriarchal).⁶

Modernists cannot justify their use of logic. Where is the standard? Who set the rules for logic? Likewise, they cannot justify laws of science (when everything came into being by chance?). Since our minds always interpret—using language—what comes through our senses, how can we trust our senses? Where can we get the right interpretation?

The postmodernists are absolutely right in declaring that men are trapped in a prison house of language. They cannot know the facts without an interpretation of those facts; they can never know the bare fact itself. Although they may claim to ground their thinking in certain foundations, they have actually built the foundations themselves.

In fact, even though the postmodernists reject all foundations, they still share a common foundation with all unbelievers. Their thinking is circular. All unbelievers—and postmodernists are no exception—ground their thought in the rejection of the God of the Bible and the assertion of their own independence.⁷

We, as Christian apologists, cannot argue on the basis of common ground with unbelievers. The old apologetic was wrong when it tried to do so. There is no common ground because we start with God and they start with themselves. Unbelievers must be challenged: either they must give up their starting point and turn to the God of the Bible, or they must become consistent with their starting point.

As unbelievers become more and more consistent in their thinking, their thinking itself will break down. To reject God is to reject the possibility of thought. Those who refuse to give Him glory, who seek to be wise apart from Him, become fools (Rom. 1:21-22). Those who do not want God in their knowledge will have increasingly darkened minds (Rom. 1:28).

The Christian apologetic must confront the problem at the root: What is the foundation? Postmodernism sweeps away all the unbeliever's foundations. The unbeliever can never know truth—unless there is a

transcendent logos, a sovereign Word, who is also a person. There can be no meaning unless God, the God of the Bible, who speaks truth, uses our language to declare truth and ensures that language can indeed reveal truth.

No one can live consistently as an unbeliever. To give in to postmodernism is to abandon oneself to utter despair. There is no way of truly communicating to others, since every attempt to communicate is frustrated by the flaws in language and by the oppressive nature of language. There is no way of ever knowing truth. There are only contradictions. Some people plunge into pleasure, since there is no meaning to be found anyway. Others grasp for power. There is only oppression in the prison house of language.

Until God's grace enters the prison house. God created language. He was the first to speak, and His Word is truth. He created man as a speaking being. And though man is fallen, God still uses language to speak His truth. God has chosen to have His truth proclaimed through preaching, through language (Rom. 10:14), and He ensures that His Word is effective (Rom. 10:17; Isa. 55:11). His word is "living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword" (Heb. 4:12). As we challenge unbelievers to abandon the hopelessness of unbelief, grounded in the demand for independence from God, and as we bring the Word of God to unbelievers, that Word will be mighty to save.

The postmodernists may think they have escaped God—"He doesn't exist. If He speaks, I cannot know His meaning, and His words are flawed and twisted by the language He uses." But they cannot escape from His Word and Spirit. "Language is not merely a prison house; God's language can break in from the outside and give us freedom" (Veith 68).

Questions:

1. Who is the creator of the phenomenon of language according to the deconstructionists?
2. What do the deconstructionists mean when they say 'there is no transcendental logos?' (Compare John 1:1-3 where 'word' (English) translates the Greek word 'logos' (λογος)?
3. What are some of the results of deconstructionism?
4. Do you see any effects from deconstructionism that we can use effectively in witnessing as Christians?
5. To what does Barach refer when he says deconstructionists—even in rejecting all foundations—still share a common foundation with all unbelievers?
6. What is the inevitable result of deconstructionism? (Ro. 1:21,22 & 28)

Projects:

1. Give an example of the effect of deconstructionism in the realm of 'political correctness.'
2. Give an example of the influence of deconstructionism on the content of a TV program which is listed as 'documentary.'