

II. LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

1. Introduction

In the previous lecture, when dealing with postmodernist views of nature, we gave attention to the paganizing tendencies in much of contemporary thought. Postmodernists, we noted, follow modernists in rejecting Christianity, but often they are not nearly as comfortable in a secular society as their modern predecessors were and seek to satisfy their needs for spirituality in non-christian religions.

This paganizing tendency is one strand that binds various post-modernist manifestations together. There are other such broad, underlying factors. It may be a good idea if, before proceeding with our topic, we list the more conspicuous ones.

If a return to paganism is the first of these factors, the related belief that there is nothing but the material universe is a second one. The postmodernist universe is a closed box. Nature deities may exist, but there is no transcendent God above and beyond nature. Postmodernism is anti-transcendent.

A third underlying characteristic is man's view of man. Modernism was humanistic, which means that it had a high opinion of man's moral and intellectual abilities. Postmodernism has lost this faith. We saw last time that more than one contemporary thinker considers the human being to be in the same league as other creatures. This demotion deprives man of his headship of creation. Under postmodernism man has also lost his freedom of choice, his responsibility, and his identity. His actions are determined by his society, whose product he is, and also by his heredity, race, gender, and sexual preference, and by the language he uses. There are a lot of influences, but the one that is excluded is human reason.

As implied in the foregoing — and this brings us to our fourth underlying idea — postmodernism denies the unity of the human race. Modernism believed in this unity. It held that human nature was the same everywhere. People could understand each other across time and across cultural, racial, and gender lines. Postmodernists no longer think so. Unity and universalism are being replaced by fragmentation and tribalization. Woman profiles herself against man, black against white, homosexual against heterosexual, and one ethnic group against another. Nor is that all. We are told that people of different genders and races *think* differently and

see reality in different lights. This means that something worse than a Babylonian confusion of speech has taken place among us. We are not only unable to understand each other's language, we cannot even translate each other's terms and so make communication possible again.

A fifth idea that underlies postmodernism — the one that is basic to all the others — is the disbelief in objective truth. Although modernism certainly was not free from scepticism, it did believe that truth existed and that the human being was capable of finding it. This belief, which it inherited from both the Greeks and Christianity, was strengthened by the successes of modern science, which gave witness to the great power of human reason.

For postmodernism, on the other hand, objective truth does not exist, and even if it did exist, we could not find it. We are, according to many postmodernists, not even searching for it. We may think and say we are, but we are deceiving ourselves and others. We are hiding behind a mask. What we are really after is not truth or knowledge, but the satisfaction of our instinctual desires. For not reason is in control; the will and the instincts dominate.

This rejection of truth and this belief in the pre-eminence of desire help explain the stress in our society on aesthetics and language — the topic of the present lecture. Epistemology (or theory of knowledge) is being replaced by theories of interpretation, and many of these theories are not intended to assist in a search for truth, but to have therapeutic value. That is, they make it possible for their users to interpret a text in such a way that it enhances their sense of power and well being.

In short, if one had to define postmodernism in a few words, one could call it the world-view of scepticism, irrationality, duplicity, and make-belief. One could also call it the world-view of incoherence, for logical contradictions abound. Postmodernists know this but do not worry about it. They have concluded that belief in logic and consistency is, like belief in objective truth, a leftover from modernism and without foundation. It was the ruling groups of the past that developed the rules of logic, and they did so in order to advance their own goals. This means that the rules of logic too are social constructs and can be ignored. Paradox and incoherence are facts of life.

These foundational beliefs and unbeliefs will come to the fore time and again. I have outlined them at the beginning of this lecture because I believe that, by keeping them in mind, we will be in a better

position to relate the specific manifestations of the postmodernist world-view. I hope that it will also enable us to see more clearly the cause of postmodernism's uncertainties and confusions, namely its apostasy and unbelief. The postmodernist phenomenon makes it clear that the rejection of God implies the demotion of man, the denial of truth, and the disappearance of universal norms. It is only in God's light that we see light.

Some qualifications

So much for the underlying postmodernist belief systems. Two other preliminary remarks have to be made. The first one is that postmodernism is a multifaceted thing. This means that qualifications are often necessary, and this applies, among other things, to what I said about the postmodernist rejection of Christianity. The anti-christian attitude is widespread in contemporary society, but it is also true that there are aspects in postmodernism which make it more hospitable to religious belief than late-modernism was. That is important. I hope to give closer attention to it later.

In the second place: the multifacetedness of postmodernism and the contradictions inherent in it mean that often one cannot really use the term itself without further ado. What one postmodern person asserts, another may deny. It is therefore not really proper to say, as I frequently do, that 'postmodernism' stands for such and such a thing. I ought to say, instead, that some, or many, or most postmodern thinkers stand for it. But to include all those qualifications can become tiresome, and I therefore often leave them out. But it should be kept in mind that when I refer to 'postmodernism' as such, I have in mind something that may be widely held by present-day opinion-makers, but that is not necessarily held by all of them.

We can now move on to our topic proper. As the title indicates, the present lecture deals with postmodernist attitudes to language and literature, and therefore to communication in general. I have divided the topic into three parts. They are, respectively, postmodernism and language, postmodernist views of literature, and a concluding evaluation.

2. Postmodernism and language

The centrality of language

Postmodernists stress the centrality of language in human life and culture. Just as, in the course of history, religion was replaced by science as the centre of culture, so postmodernists attempt to replace science by literature. Science, together with philosophy, will have to be considered, in the words of one commentator,¹⁴ as at best a literary genre. This means, as I already mentioned, that theories of knowledge are to be replaced by theories of interpretation, and that the search for objective truth is abandoned in favour of a more subjective and pragmatic approach to knowledge.

Although we disagree with the use postmodernists make of language, we must admit that they are right in stressing its centrality. Language is indeed, to quote some contemporary sociologists, ‘the fundamental institution of society’ and the first one we encounter when we come into this world.¹⁵ That means that we are conscious of language even before we are conscious of the family. If you want to find out how true this is, observe a small baby. It may be no more than four or six weeks old, and unable to distinguish between its mother and a stranger who holds it. But it is certainly ready to communicate. It responds to smiles and gestures, and produces sounds in reply to our words. That is, it wants to use language. This is true of all healthy babies. They like to listen to our talking and they want to talk themselves. It comes naturally to them, for the ability to use language is typically human. It is what distinguishes human beings from non-human nature. And it is central to human existence. Without it society would not be possible.

The postmodernist attack on language

If, therefore, society is to operate properly, language has to be reliable. A word, a proposition, an utterance of any kind must refer to a definite thing or event or idea, and must mean the same for all listeners and readers. If that is not the case, confusion and chaos take over.

But it is this very thing — the reliability of our language — that postmodernists deny. Drawing attention to the findings of philosophies of language and of modern linguistics (the scientific study of language) they say that language is arbitrary. For one thing, they point out, there appears to be little or no correspondence between words and the things or concepts to which they refer. This is evident from the fact that different lan-

languages use different words for the same thing: the English speak of a tree, the French of an *arbre*, the Germans of a *Baum*, and so on. It is also evident from the fact that meanings change over time. A frequently used example of shifting meanings is the English word “nice.” In the course of time this word has meant, among other things, foolish, stupid, wanton, and coy, whereas now it practically means the opposite of these concepts.

One could of course reply that even if words are arbitrary, the concepts they stand for are not. Niceness, foolishness, wantonness, coyness — they refer to unchanging concepts, no matter what term is used to describe them. Or do they? Postmodern philosophers tell us they don’t, and they again have a point. What was considered foolishness in former times — such as, let us say, atheism, or disregard of authority — is often considered wisdom at present. The meanings of words and concepts, we are told, are *social constructs*, that is, creations of the society that uses them. They are grounded in nothing more substantial than convention, and because convention continually changes, they have no objective, universal validity. They differ from society to society, from culture to culture. Indeed, for some postmodernists they differ from gender to gender and from race to race within a given society. All things are relative, and utterly so. What is true for me is not necessarily true for others.

Language as a prison

Language therefore is in the same situation as those who use it. Both are social constructs. This suggests that we are prisoners of language, that we cannot have any insights beyond those which our language allows us. Postmodernists indeed teach this. They say that our beliefs about morality, about relationships, and about everything else, are determined by the words, the grammar, the metaphors, and the concepts of our language. I will give you an illustration, one which postmodernists often use. Our western languages abound in binary oppositions. Examples are: Creator-creature, male-female, true-false, faith-reason, good-evil, justice-injustice, and so on. It’s a matter of differences, of either-or.

Because our language has this structure, postmodernists say, we cannot but *think* in terms of such opposites, and we believe that such thinking reflects reality. The fact of the matter is, however, that it is only a peculiarity of our language and culture. Other cultures exist which stress not the differences between God and man and nature, but their unity (oriental pantheism). Similarly, there are cultures which believe in

the essential unity of male and female (a belief that is expressed, for example, in their creation of androgynous gods, that is gods that have both male and female characteristics). There are also cultures which believe in the unity of good and evil (this is the case in most pantheistic societies, which consider good and evil to be two aspects of the same thing). The language of these people causes them to see reality in an altogether different way than we do. In brief, each language creates its own reality. There is no overarching, objectively valid truth.

We are imprisoned in our language, according to postmodern thinkers, for a variety of other reasons. One of them is that we cannot really think of anything unless we have a word for it. Although it means a departure from the typically postmodernist thought-world, I will illustrate this with a religious example. Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism speaks of our only comfort in life and death. If we lived in an environment that had no words for soul, sin, eternal life, salvation, and so on, it would be hard to understand this confession. And more and more people do in fact live in such an environment. Many people today can make little sense of Christianity, or even of traditional Christian morality, because they no longer know the words that refer to these things. They do, on the other hand, know words that pull them away from the Christian religion and from the confession of Lord's Day 1. We can think of such expressions as: God is dead, matter is all that exists, everyone for himself, we live only once. And this shows, postmodernists say, that *we* don't think, but that our language thinks for us.

For postmodernists, then, words and concepts have no objective, universal meaning — a meaning that is the same for everyone. Ultimately this is a result of the fact that the universe is closed. There is no omnipresent, transcendent God to give meaning to our words, and to establish universally valid norms and standards. The American philosopher Richard Rorty admits this when he writes, "The suggestion that truth, as well as the world, is out there is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own."¹⁶ But since there is no such being, there is no transcendent meaning.

Language therefore is not used to find or convey truth, and the same applies to the pursuit of knowledge. For there is no objective, overarching truth. What we call the pursuit of knowledge is essentially a power game, or it is engaged in for therapeutic purposes, but it is not a search for objective truth. We already drew attention to this point in the

introduction, and we will return to it in the second section, when we deal with literature.

The 'why' of the postmodernist view of language

How are we to reply to the postmodernist position on language? I think we must begin by admitting that it has validity. There is no gain-saying the fact that words are arbitrary, that meanings shift, and that linguistic usage strongly influences our way of thinking and our perception of reality. To say this is not to subscribe to the postmodernist idea that all truth is a social construct and therefore relative. But it is to admit that there are not as many certainties as modernist society believed. And that, I think, is all for the good, for the modernist position was overconfident. And it is well to realize that it was precisely this overconfidence that made it destructive of tradition, authority, and religion.

For modernism, as we saw last time, was convinced that it had hit upon *the* method to find indubitable, objective truth. That method enabled it to judge all other cultures and all belief systems. Modernity's own belief systems, which had been properly tested, were supposed to be objectively and everlastingly valid. Different ones — those that could not be verified by means of logical reasoning or objective, scientific tests — could be dismissed as subjective, time-bound, and culturally conditioned. That belief has caused a great deal of havoc, also among Christians. Its exposure as part of a world-view that was itself culturally conditioned was overdue.

In that sense postmodernism has served as a valuable corrective. It has taught us humility by reminding us that there are limits to what we can know. Just as importantly, it has taught, at least by implication, that we don't have to discard beliefs simply because they cannot pass the grid that modernism has established. The fact that our eyes cannot see God, or that our intellect cannot understand a concept like that of the Trinity, does not mean that therefore belief in God and in the Trinity is ill-founded. Reason and the senses are not the only valid ways to truth; there are other ones as well. Faith is one of them. Truth exceeds method; it encompasses more than can be proven scientifically.

An either-or attitude?

Postmodernism, then, can be welcomed as a corrective, at least

on these points. Unfortunately, it is not satisfied to serve as a mere corrective. It wants not to modify but to overthrow modernism, and indeed the entire western tradition, including the Greek and the Christian heritages. And it goes about this job by saying that there is no truth, and that we are not really trying to reach truth.

The question is: on what does it base this assertion? One factor is no doubt that postmodernism itself is influenced by the type of either-or, black-and-white, all-or-nothing thinking that it says is embedded in western language. In this case it is: *either* we can reach an unbiased and truly objective understanding of things, as modernism taught, *or* our understanding is irreducibly subjective — the postmodernist view. A compromise, an in-between position, is not possible. Or again: *either* we control language, using it as a tool to reach objective truth, *or* language controls us, telling us what we can and cannot believe. Again, the possibility of an in-between position is ignored.

This either-or attitude, incidentally, also helps explain the attraction of the idea of *perspectivism*, as taught by Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth-century German philosopher who strongly influenced postmodernist thought. Perspectivism refers to the fact that we look at things from our own restricted viewpoints or perspectives or frames of reference; that we are unable to see the world and the things of the world objectively and in their totality. We are all limited to our own individual perspective, which is different from that of our neighbour or, for that matter, of people from a different culture or a different historical epoch.

For many postmodernists, perspectivism implies a thoroughgoing relativism. Since each individual has nothing but his or her own private reality, they reason, objective reality is forever concealed from us. The possibility that our creaturely limitations, while indeed preventing us from seeing the world as God sees it, may nevertheless allow us to reach a sufficiently *reliable* view of that world, is disregarded. As before, it is a matter of all or nothing.

The transformation of society

But explaining the postmodernist view in such either-or terms is, at best, only a partial explanation. Postmodernist thinkers also promote their view of language because it provides them with a means to assert their independence from God, society, and the past, with a weapon to attack western culture, and with the tool to bring about a new society.

Language, they say, has that power. Throughout history influential people have changed both the vocabulary of their time and the minds of those who used that vocabulary. Luther can serve as an illustration. The Lutheran Reformation and Luther's translation of the Bible into German transformed Germany and indeed much of the rest of the world. Another illustration is that of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, a period which showed that "changing languages and other social practices may produce human beings of a sort that had never existed before" — human beings who, for example, no longer see themselves as responsible to a supernatural power. And these examples can be multiplied.¹⁷ They can be found in our own, postmodern times.

Although all postmodernist thinkers believe in the ability of language to transform society, they are not all agreed as to the strategies that should be used. Several schools exist, but for our purpose it is sufficient to distinguish only two. They are what I will call the Nietzschean-idealist school and the activist one. The first consists of people who stay close to the ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche, the nineteenth-century German prophet of postmodernism. Nietzsche's desire for autonomy and his hatred of western traditions, including Christianity, were strong and enduring, and he made it his life's task to destroy western culture and replace it with something altogether new. The work was to be done not by political activism but through language. Just as God by a speech act had called the universe into existence, and just as the Incarnate Word, again by means of language, had introduced the Christian epoch, so Nietzsche too would use language to bring about a new world. The biblical examples I used, incidentally, are to the point, for Nietzsche had delusions of divinity. He believed that what he considered his most important book (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) would take the place of the Christian Bible, and shortly before he collapsed into the insanity that would last until his death ten years later, he signed a number of his letters as 'the crucified one.'¹⁸

Nietzsche's followers do not share his delusions of divine grandeur, but the demand for autonomy, the faith in language as a world-destroying and world-creating power, and the desire to replace western culture, continue to exist. None of these idealist postmodernists, including Nietzsche himself, has managed to come with a realistic blueprint of the new society, however. Nor has it become clear that words alone can create a new reality, apart from profound social and political changes, and apart from any coercive measures. In other words, the dreams of the

Nietzscheans seem to many to be utopian ones. This explains, I believe, the rise of the second school to which I referred, that of the political activists.

These activists, too, attack western culture and desire to replace it, but their aim is first of all to come to the help of the so-called victim groups in western society — women, blacks, natives, and gays. The work of these activists can perhaps best be explained in terms of the evolutionistic world-view. I referred to the premisses of that world-view in the previous lecture, but it won't hurt to return to them. They include the following. 1. As products of a blind and non-moral nature people are ruled, like the animal, by will and instinct rather than by reason. 2. The basic law of nature is that of the struggle for survival, which leads to the domination of the strong over the weak. 3. Because mankind has, in the course of its evolution, developed ideas of morality, it is necessary for the strong to mask their evil intentions and try to legitimate their oppressiveness. And that they do pre-eminently by their control of language. When these postmodernists say that language is a social construct, they mean that it is the construct of the strong, who use it to promote their power over the weak.

Language as a weapon

In view of this reasoning it is to be expected that a major concern of these militants is to deprive the oppressor of his power over language. They follow several strategies, one of which we just described. It is to show that language was developed by the oppressor and served as his tool. Grammar, concepts, the use of binary oppositions, the choice of metaphors — all were subservient, these activists say, to that purpose. To realize this fact is the first step in removing the mask of the oppressor and exposing him for what he is.

A second strategy is to bring about a *change* in language. It is to replace discriminatory terms with non-discriminatory ones, to insist upon the use of inclusive language, and so on. That has become the task of the well-known political correctness movement. That movement instructs us, for example, to replace the word mankind by humankind and the word chairman by chairperson; it calls abortion not murder but simply a measure to ensure 'reproductive health'; it speaks of heterosexuals to suggest that it is just one 'sexual preference,' alongside the homosexual one; and it refers to opponents of homosexuality as homophobics — that is, people who have a morbid and irrational fear of fellow human beings. It

won't be necessary to multiply these examples; they are well known to us all. We encounter them daily.

Still a third strategy to wrest power from the oppressor is to expose the hidden meanings of written texts, for the literature that a culture produces, these militants say, also serves as a means to promote the rule of the strong. The manner in which they approach this work leads us to the uses postmodernists make of literary theory. That is the topic of the second part of this lecture, to which we will turn shortly.

An evaluation

But before doing so, we must go back to the postmodernist charge about the arbitrary nature of language as such. I said earlier that that view has a measure of validity, but also that it does not have to lead to the conclusions postmodernism draws from it. The question that still needs to be addressed is how we can avoid such conclusions. Concretely, what is our answer to the position that language is arbitrary, that we are imprisoned in it, and that we cannot reach truths beyond those that our language and our culture allow us to reach?

Part of the answer has already been given in the foregoing. Today's attitude of relativism and scepticism is strongly influenced by our society's all-or-nothing approach, which warps its judgement. For although postmodernists are right in saying that we cannot have *exhaustive* knowledge, it does not at all follow that we cannot have *reliable* knowledge either. If this were the case, how would we explain, for example, the possibility and success of science? It was because early scientists believed that in God's light we see light that they embarked upon the scientific enterprise. They were, in the words of the astronomer Johannes Kepler, 'thinking God's thoughts after Him.' Contemporary science still operates on belief in a truth that is independent of time, culture, race, and gender. And science itself provides empirical proof for the truth of that belief. For it is being done by easterners and westerners, by blacks and whites, by men and women.

A similar answer can be given to postmodernist assertions about the arbitrariness of language. The fact that the language we have inherited influences our view of reality does not mean that no judgments can be made as to the validity of one belief system over another. We can evaluate these systems by their fruits. This applies, for example, to the matter of the binary oppositions. By comparing western societies with pantheis-

tic and pagan ones, one can determine whether or not an honouring of these oppositions is conducive to the establishment of a just society. For anyone who values such factors as individual and civil freedoms and humanitarian concerns the answer can hardly be in doubt.

In short, the dichotomies “work.” Nor is that surprising. For they were not, as postmodernists would have it, imposed by power-hungry cliques, but they are part of biblical teachings. The West was nurtured on Christianity, and this fact has placed a stamp on its language and its grammar, and therefore also on the way it organized society.¹⁹

Language as a prison?

Postmodernists tell us that we are imprisoned in our language not only because its vocabulary and structures determine our view of reality, but also because we can't understand or know anything if our culture has no word for it. And in a way, we saw, this also is true. We need words and concepts to make sense of life. For that reason people who say that we won't attract unbelievers to the church unless we get rid of old-fashioned words like sin and grace and redemption are wrong. They (and we) need these words, as well as many others that our culture has forgotten. Without them we can neither believe in God, nor understand His Word, nor serve Him. The fact that these words are being forgotten in our culture does, of course, imply the need that we *begin* our work of engaging that culture (for example in evangelism) by translating these words.

The danger of the disappearance of essential words also goes to show, incidentally, why the study of literature, including the literature of former times, and the study of history are so important. If we know only what our society allows us to know, then we are indeed in danger of becoming prisoners of language. The study of the past, as the ancient Roman philosopher Cicero already told us, delivers us from that prison. That's why helping our six-week old baby to master the art of speaking is not enough. It must, in due time, also learn to listen, to read, to write, and to think; it must learn about God and become acquainted with the language of faith. And it can learn that language, assuming that the present generation does not allow it to be forgotten.

It can also learn words for new experiences, for the idea that we can't think at all beyond the vocabulary we inherit is erroneous. If the idea were true, no new words or ideas could ever arise, but, as postmodernists themselves have to admit, they do. We see some animal, for

example a kangaroo, and we attach a word to it. Or we invent something, for example a computer, and again we attach a word to it. Indeed, we invent an entire computer language. This type of thing has happened throughout history.

We have that capacity because God created us in such a way that we could serve Him as stewards of His creation. The central error of the postmodernist position is the belief that we live in a closed universe. Atheism is at the bottom of their theories: the belief that God is dead and that man must and can establish his own criteria of truth and value. The inevitable result of this belief is, as Nietzsche foresaw and as the century since Nietzsche has made abundantly clear, the triumph of nihilism and the replacement of rational argument by desire and the will to power.²⁰

To summarize

Let us briefly recapitulate this first part. Postmodernism realizes the centrality of language in human society but makes a point of stressing its unreliability. Language is a social construct, the creation of the dominant groups in society, which invented vocabularies, grammars, concepts, and metaphors to maintain and extend their power. Language therefore is arbitrary. Words and concepts, moreover, have shifting meanings, and there is no way to evaluate linguistic usage because there is no God, and therefore no objective, overarching meaning.

That is one side of the coin. The other side is that language — arbitrary, slippery, and unreliable as it may be — is powerful. It has, postmodernists teach, the capacity to imprison its users, in the sense that their mental horizon is limited by the grammar, the words and the concepts of their language. It also has the power to transform society and to create an entirely different one. While it is no longer the means to find and express truth, language has great pragmatic value. It is capable of making and unmaking worlds and cultures.

And here, I add in passing, we have an illustration of postmodernism's logical incoherence. On the one hand it stresses the insubstantiality of the human self, which is but a product and prisoner of the language it uses. But this same insubstantial self has, on the other hand, the power to create whatever reality it fancies.

Postmodernists — idealists and political activists both — indeed attempt to use language for the purpose of creating a new world and soci-

ety. To restrict ourselves now to the second group: these people say, as we have seen, that it is the dominant groups in human society that control language and mould it in such a way that it serves to safeguard and extend their dominion. The strong have played this power game for centuries, even for millennia. But the time has now come for a counter-attack, and that is what these activists are engaged in. They believe that by showing language to be arbitrary and a mere power tool they expose the hypocrisy of the strong, and that this enables them to take their power from them.

That, we saw, is the first part of their strategy. The second part is to change the language; to replace words giving power to the white heterosexual male by words that give power to women, coloured people, and homosexuals. We had an example of that as well: it is one of the purposes of the political correctness movement. And the third part of their strategy is to turn to the written *texts* society has produced and show that these, too, serve as power tools. They must therefore either be ignored, or they must be submitted to the kind of literary criticism that exposes their hidden meaning and hypocrisy. We now turn to that topic.

3. Postmodernism and literature

The heading of this section speaks of literature, but that term is meant to include any written text, also those that do not fall under the heading of literature proper. Among the latter are historical studies, works of theology and philosophy, laws, legal theories, and so on. The term does not refer to unwritten means of communication. Postmodernists apply the word ‘text’ to just about anything by means of which we communicate — to oral discourse, and also to our art and music, to the fashions we choose and the people we associate with. We make a statement, they say, by means of these as well. Although they are right, we will not follow their usage here but when referring to texts restrict ourselves to written ones.

Literary criticism: three theories

Texts must be interpreted, which means that they must be subjected to what is called literary criticism. Another word for it, which we will meet frequently, is hermeneutics. There are various theories of literary criticism, and to clarify the topic we are dealing with I will provide a brief (and necessarily oversimplified) overview of them.

In the first place, one can approach a text by giving a lot of attention to the author, to the times in which he or she lived, and to the original readers. To illustrate, I will use a biblical example, namely Paul's Letter to the Romans, but it must be kept in mind that much of what applies to biblical interpretation applies also to the interpretation of non-biblical texts. When dealing with the Epistle to the Romans, interpreters concerned with the author's intent would try to find out all they could about Paul's life, his mission, his style, and his theology. They would also study the situation of the recipients, that is, of the Romans living in the first century of the Christian era, because this too would help them in interpreting the letter. This approach is referred to as that of *authorial intent*. It is important. Paying attention to author and background is often necessary and can be enlightening. But it can also be overdone. The danger exists that we think we already know what Paul will be saying before we have paid sufficiently close attention to the text itself. We may read something into the text that is not there, and we may overlook something that is there but that does not fit our preconceptions.

Because of these dangers, other critics try to ignore author and background as much as possible so that they may come to the text without preconceptions. This is the approach of the so-called 'new criticism' (which is not to be confused with the postmodernist 'new hermeneutics'). The new criticism arose early in the twentieth century. Critics belonging to this school look at the structure of the text, giving attention to paradox and irony, examining the imagery, carefully studying the meaning of words and metaphors, and so on. Here the text is at the centre, and the people who apply this type of criticism are concerned with *textual intent*. It is a corrective to the practice of concentrating on authorial intent, but it can again be one-sided. Attention to author and background can greatly help our understanding of a text. Furthermore, as the German hermeneuticist Gadamer has suggested, by studying a text's literary features alone we may ignore much of its content.²¹ This is one of the risks of studying the Bible not as proclamation but as literature. Critics have also remarked that members of the school of new criticism tend to give insufficient attention to the link between literature and reality, and to the validity of the text's moral implications and truth claims.²²

In the third place we have what has been called the *reader-response* or *reception* theory. Reader-response critics do not give much attention to author and historical background. Even the text itself is not

necessarily studied with great care. What counts is what the text says to the present reader. Here, too, there are positive aspects. When reading the Bible, for example, we do want to know what the Lord says to us, personally. Furthermore, as readers we may well find meanings in a poem or play or novel that the author himself was not aware of, or that we had not recognized before, at an earlier reading. Indeed, modern hermeneutics has stressed the undeniable fact that (although the text remains the same) *meanings* change in the course of one's life, and that there is a constant interaction between text and reader. Understanding is not without a strong subjective or personal element. These truths the reader-response approach recognizes, and we can benefit from the insights it provides. We must also realize, however, that the approach can be quite subjective and easily results in misreadings. The danger is that we read what we want to read, and ignore the objective meaning of the text.

In short, all three theories have positive aspects but all three are also one-sided. The common-sense approach, therefore, is to try, as far as possible, to combine the three. I think that our own Bible scholars and preachers do this. They give attention to the author, the times in which the text was written, the original recipients, the text, and the contemporary reader.

Of course, there are differences between believing and non-believing biblical hermeneuticists. The former know that the human authors of the Bible did not always realize the full meaning of their message. Old Testament prophecies, for example, frequently did not become clear until the time of the New Testament. That is why we often read in the gospels that something happened in order that one of these prophecies might find fulfilment. Believing interpreters, in short, keep in mind the possibility of an ulterior meaning, of the so-called *sensus plenior*. They remember that the final author of the letters in question is not Paul, or Peter, or John, but the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Scriptures as a whole. There are other differences between the approaches of believing and non-believing biblical hermeneuticists, and between the interpretation of biblical and non-biblical texts,²³ but they do not have to detain us now. My only purpose in referring to biblical hermeneutics is to provide an example of a balanced approach to literary criticism, one that gives attention to author, historical background, original reader, text, and contemporary reader. Many interpreters also of non-biblical literature follow this balanced, common-sense approach.

Postmodernist literary theories: the new hermeneutics

Postmodernist literary theories do not follow it. I am speaking of postmodernist theories in the plural, because there is more than one. They are all related, however, and to simplify matters I will treat them as one. This postmodern version is usually referred to as the new hermeneutics. It is closest to the third theory I described, that of the reader-response, but it is applied in an excessively subjective manner. The text no longer has an inherent meaning, a meaning given to it by the author and capable of being determined by a study of the text and its background.

Or rather, the critic and reader make a point of paying little or no attention to that meaning. They place themselves in the centre, insisting that they can do with the text — the poem, novel, law, historical study, and so on — what they want. In the words of Richard Rorty (the American postmodernist philosopher we already met), the critic “is in it for what he can get out of it, not for the satisfaction of getting something right.” And therefore, he adds, the critic asks essentially the same question about the text that “the engineer or the physicist asks himself about a puzzling physical object: how shall I describe this in order to get it to do what I want?”²⁴ This implies that a text can have as many meanings as there are readers; that everything becomes relative. It also implies the potential destruction of our culture’s literary inheritance.

The foregoing has already made clear why this approach appeals to postmodern hermeneuticists, not only to activists, but to idealists as well. The traditions of a culture are preserved in the texts it has produced — in the works of its poets, playwrights, and novelists, its theologians, historians, philosophers, and lawmakers. These same texts also serve to bolster the position of the dominant groups. Therefore, to become free from the traditions of one’s culture and to rescue the marginalized, one must become free from the texts the culture has produced.

There is more than one way of doing this. One can simply ignore these texts, and that is indeed increasingly being done at schools and universities. Far less attention is paid to the history of western civilization in general, and of western nations in particular, and also to the great books of our culture, than used to be the case. And that of course worsens the problem to which I referred earlier. More and more, people are acquainted only with the words that are fashionable in today’s secular, relativistic, and therapeutic culture, which means that they are indeed becoming prisoners of the language of their society.

In the second place, one can replace western history and literature by the histories and literary works of the so-called victim groups: women, natives, blacks, third-world authors, and homosexuals. That too is a common practice nowadays. There is, of course, merit in giving attention to the literature and histories of minorities, as long as standards are not placed in jeopardy, and as long as it is not done at the expense of the history and the literary and other works of our own civilization.

Deconstructionism: origins

And in the third place, one can expose the hidden meaning of western texts, show that they are nothing but tools of the oppressor, and so neutralize them. This process, a radical version of reader-response criticism, is called deconstructionism. We will give some attention to the principles underlying this theory of interpretation. This means that we will have to go back in history a bit and introduce three late-modern thinkers whose ideas have strongly influenced postmodernism in general and the new hermeneutics in particular. The three men are Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud.

Karl Marx lived from 1818 to 1883 and was, with his friend Friedrich Engels, the founder of what became known as communism. A modernist himself, he influenced postmodernism in at least three ways. First, he was a philosophical materialist and a hater of Christianity, which he called, among other things, the opium of the people. Second, he was, like our postmodernist reformers, an advocate of the oppressed. And third — the point to which I draw your special attention — his ideology gave rise to the idea that there is a hidden agenda behind all we do, say, or write, even though we ourselves may not be aware of it. For Marxists, that hidden agenda has to do with economics and with the struggle for power among socio-economic classes. We may think, according to Marxist critics, that we are inspired by the noblest of motives, but behind it all is the desire for power and gain. We wear masks. We are inherently hypocritical.

The German philosopher **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900) reached a similar conclusion. The son of a Lutheran pastor, Nietzsche had been a pious Christian in his youth, but in his student days he turned against Christianity, and he soon became one of its most violent enemies. Nietzsche was among the first to proclaim openly and persistently that God was dead. Man was a product of nature, and the quintessential law of nature was the desire for domination, which Nietzsche called ‘the will

to power.’ That will was behind all that happened in nature, and it also inspired all that people did, said, and wrote. The conclusion was therefore again, as it was in Marxism, that what speakers and writers proclaim cannot be taken at face value. There is a hidden meaning behind what we say or write, and that hidden meaning is different from the apparent one. It may well be its opposite.

And finally there is **Sigmund Freud**, an Austrian Jew who lived from 1856 to 1939. Freud was a psychoanalyst, who made it his job to explain and cure the neuroses that in his days were affecting increasingly large numbers in western society. He explained neuroses with reference to subconscious stimuli, many of which had their origin in infantile experiences, while others went back as far as the beginnings of human history itself. Whatever their origin, the stimuli were not connected with man’s reason, but with drives or instincts. Among these were the desire for power, the death-wish, and, especially, the sex drive.

These drives were much stronger than reason because they were older, having been present already in man’s animal ancestors. They were therefore ‘natural’ drives. Unfortunately, once reason had developed and civilization had come about, man had been forced to suppress these drives. To keep society functioning properly you can’t behave like lions or wolves. But the drives remained strong in humans, and their suppression led to guilt feelings, which in turn led to neuroses, obsessions, and multiple-personality disorders. They also served as motives for man’s actions, operating again at the unconscious level, as a hidden agenda. For Freud the hidden agenda was the satisfaction of mankind’s sexual desires.

You realize the reductionism implied in this kind of theory. All that man has ever believed in and cherished — religion and morality, art and literature, freedoms and civil rights, love and pity and charity — all this can for Freudians be reduced to repressed sexuality, just as for Marxism it can be reduced to the desire for dominion and economic gain, and for Nietzsche to the will to power. I called these theories reductionistic, which means that they explain human action with reference to one single motive, and that frequently the lowest one.

Although we reject this reductionistic explanation, we admit that the motives to which these men refer are present. The desire for gain and for power is strong, and so are other instinctual drives like the sexual one. Indeed, when these late-modern thinkers drew attention to such hidden motives, they were repeating, even if they would not have admitted

it, a truth about human nature that the Bible also teaches, but that modern humanism denied. For does not the Bible say of the human heart that it is “deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt,” so that no one can understand it? (Jer. 17.9, RSV). The Bible, however, speaks also of God’s restraint of human wickedness, so that history can continue. More than that, it speaks of grace and of the restoration of the image of God in man. Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud rejected the biblical message.

The hermeneutics of suspicion

Deconstructionists, then, are able to incorporate these Marxist, Nietzschean, and Freudian ideas into their theories of literary criticism. Looking at a novel, a poem, a law, or whatever, they can show how it was inspired by the author’s drive for power, for gain, or for sexual dominance. This type of hermeneutics is referred to, quite appropriately, as the hermeneutics of suspicion, or the hermeneutics of power. It could also be called the hermeneutics of therapy, for deconstruction is applied for therapeutic purposes as well. People turn to it because it gives them freedom from bondage to tradition and religion and creates a feeling of equality. They relish the fact that they can do with an author what they feel like doing; that he no longer has any power over them. One can, moreover, reinterpret a text in such a way that it makes one feel good about oneself. After all, truth is not discovered, it is made. We create our own reality and are free to make it a pleasant one.

But if therapeutic usage is important, so is the use of deconstructionism as a weapon and a power tool. It can be used to show the duplicity of the founders of western society and so to break their spell and destroy their power. Society has to become convinced that the literature, the historical works, the religion, the laws, and the moral codes of western civilization are nothing but power tools, and that therefore they can and must be replaced. In brief, deconstructionism provides postmodernists with the opportunity to make and break and transform society and — in the case of the militants — to begin the process by transferring power from the oppressor to the oppressed.

4. Conclusion

Postmodern linguists and hermeneuticists have brought us some worthwhile insights. They are correct, we saw, in drawing our attention to the deceitfulness of the human heart and, in connection therewith, to

the abuse that can be and has been made of language. We also agreed that it was time to give attention to the literature and history of minorities, even though we object to the fact that it is being done at the expense of the West's own literary inheritance. The movement was right, furthermore, in stressing the subjective element in our knowledge, and in insisting that we cannot reach exhaustive truth about reality.

But as we also noted, these facts do not have to lead to the relativism that postmodernists embrace. Their all-or-nothing attitude must be rejected. It is nonsensical to conclude that because of inevitable biases, and because we are limited in our knowledge and perspectives, no truth exists at all, and no real communication is possible. If that were the case, human society would be impossible. Indeed, the new hermeneuticists do not believe their own doctrine. If they did believe that communication is impossible and that truth does not exist, why would they write volume after volume trying to communicate with us and convince us that they are telling us the truth? To assert dogmatically, as an infallible truth, that there is no truth is logically incoherent. Deconstructionist theories are self-refuting.

Postmodernism in general, while strong in assertions, is indeed weak in arguments and logic. It is not explained to us, for example, why life would be better if women or blacks or homosexuals were in control. Nor are we told why it would be a good thing if Eurocentrism were replaced by, let us say, Afrocentrism, and the traditions of western civilization by those of Africans, Asians, or aborigines. Also, no arguments have been offered to explain why it is only the white, western, heterosexual male who wears a mask, while other members of the human race are exempt. Particularly ill-founded is the assumption that the work of the deconstructionists is to be accepted as objectively true, even though many of them are white males themselves. Why would they not be wearing masks and pursuing duplicitous goals? Also, why should the ideas of dead white heterosexual males like Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, who inspired the movement in the first place, be taken at face value (as many postmodernists still do)?

Arbitrariness and incoherence are not the only weaknesses of the new hermeneutics. Especially as applied by militants, it has practical implications that are just as problematic. A particularly disturbing one is that it promotes what it says it is fighting against. By enhancing the difference between the sexes and races, deconstructionism is itself sexist and racist. We are told that we are the products of our gender, race, and

class, that these factors determine us, and that they create dividing walls that cannot be scaled. This implies, as some postmodernists indeed teach, that a man cannot look at things from a woman's point of view, nor a white man from the perspective of a coloured one, nor the oppressor from that of the oppressed. Each gender, race, and class has its own perspective, its own way of looking at life, its own truth, which prevents it from understanding members of the other gender and of a different race and class. Instead of reconciliation there is ongoing hostility.

Another point is that postmodernism, and especially the new hermeneutics, has practitioners of questionable morality. Adherents of this hermeneutics are practically without exception people of the left; yet some of the most influential members of the guild were involved with such a radical right-wing movement as Nazism. The philosopher Heidegger, one of the initiators of postmodernism, was at one time an anti-semitic and supporter of Hitler. The same was true of Paul de Man, the scholar who helped bring deconstructionism to American universities.²⁵ Yet other deconstructionists have defended these men. Of course, this is not difficult. You simply deny or reconstruct the facts, which deconstructionists like doing in any event. But this practice shows the movement's nihilism. One cannot build on this type of philosophy. One can only use it to destroy.

Its irrationalism and deceitfulness will not, unfortunately, guarantee the rapid demise of postmodernism. Our age itself is irrational, relativistic (in moral as in other matters), and anti-Christian. Postmodernism mirrors these traits, while at the same time it reinforces them. For it serves as the world-view of our times, as the dominant climate of opinion. That is why we have to know about it and be able to answer the questions it poses.