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Soul and Reason in Literary Criticism: Deconstructing the Deconstructionists

The text of an oral address, originally delivered in April 2002 as a polemical response to the excesses of deconstructionism in particular, and postmodernism in general, that have become all too common in literary studies during the past quarter of a century.

I begin with a poem:

Sonnet to a Postmodernist

—variation on the 43rd *Sonnet from the Portuguese*

How do I hate thee? Let me count the ways.
I hate thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach—and yes, you heard me right,
I said my soul, the part of me that prays—
I hate thee for denying words of praise
To words, to language, wasting day and night
Denying meaning, claiming wrong is right,
That brilliant colors melt to murky grays.
I hate thee for insulting Milton's muse,
For sentencing our Shakespeare to a death
Of sick perversion—but his shade now sues
Your empty mind for slander, and his wrath
Shall force you in the end to pay your dues:
You'll realize that you've just wasted breath.

I am delighted to be able to present my thoughts on the role played by literary criticism over the last three de-

It was with great pleasure that I accepted a recent invitation to speak before the Orthodox Christian Fellowship of the University of Pennsylvania on April 18, 2002, on the subject of recent trends in literary criticism, now usually summarized by the term “postmodernism.” I have rejected these since their first appearance, not because I regarded them as “Western” and therefore inappropriate for application to the Chinese poetry which I study professionally, but because I considered them to be innately fallacious, and therefore unhelpful for the study of *any* literature whatsoever. These views of mine have become generally known to my fellow Chinese poetry-scholars, but this was my first opportunity to present publicly a considered overview of the whole matter. The Orthodox Christian Fellowship, under the leadership of University of Pennsylvania Orthodox Chaplain, Fr. Alexander Webster, Ph.D., had previously hosted such speakers as the distinguished church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, and the intellectual historian Alan Charles Kors, so I knew I could count on a well-prepared audience.

acades or so, even though I am hardly qualified to do a systematic analysis of all the questions involved. By training and profession, I am a scholar of classical Chinese poetry, in itself and in relation to Chinese thought and Chinese art. But I can say that my field, like all others in the Humanities today, has been infiltrated by the approaches to literature that may have originated in departments of English, but are now universal.

The most influential of these modes of literary criticism have been “Deconstructionism,” “New Historicism,” feminist criticism, and the sexual and “body” criticism of Michel Foucault, all of which actually overlap and reinforce each other. They have all but swept from the field traditional approaches to literature, and, even more importantly, have spilled out of literary studies altogether into art history, history proper, and indeed all the humanities. What is more, they have further spread to such fields as the law; one of the leading deconstructionist literary critics, Stanley Fish, when he was at Duke University, held chairs in both the English Department and the Law School. This fact alone serves to make a crucial point: that the distinction between reality and fiction is simply denied by the likes of Fish. Their idea is that there is no reality, only interpretation. The “stronger”

I am a Jew—non-observant, not even barmitzvahed—who has converted to Christianity (baptized into the Orthodox Church, 1988), and one reason for my conversion was the conviction that the disastrous trends of recent thought in general are attributable to the rejection of God by the intelligentsia. When I repeated this talk in the class of a colleague at George Washington University, one of the students asked me if I considered it necessary to believe in God to reject “postmodernism.” I answered, no, that mere common sense should suffice; I pointed to Professor Kors as a perfect example of a self-professed atheist who rejects it as well. But I stated that I grounded my argument as I did because of this view of mine, that the “flight from God” of which Max Picard wrote in 1934 has had disastrous consequences precisely in the realm of ideas.

I am most grateful for the opportunity to publish this talk in *JAOS*. I do so in the spirit of openness, without which real intellectual discourse is impossible.

interpretation wins out, in “real life” as in “literature.” And while the abstract version of this doctrine may originate in the groves of academe, it easily spills out and affects the popular culture. In the realm of art and entertainment, a Woody Allen is able to make a film called “Deconstructing Harry.” And in the realm of law, we have seen one outcome of this mere willfulness in the jury nullification during the O. J. Simpson trial: the jury had simply made up its mind that it would acquit him as a statement against “racism,” despite the DNA evidence linking the blood in his vehicle to that of the murder victim. Will trumps reason; thus the triumph of postmodernist criticism throughout the intellectual world has contributed to the general decadence of our times.

But I get ahead of myself here. I have used the term “postmodernist” (always to be understood with quotation marks around it when I use it; our side can use ironic quotation marks too) as a catch-all phrase for the types of literary criticism I am discussing. This word, however, is a misnomer, a chimera of no substance. Those features which it is alleged to possess have all along been part and parcel of the modern era, in which we are still living, whenever one may date its point of origin, and however much our jaded intelligentsia may yearn for radical change.

One may say that the triumph of postmodernism has occurred on the watch of the Baby Boomers, since the 1960s, really coming to full fruition from, say, the mid-’70s through the ’80s, ’90s, and to the present moment. And so it may be taken to be the intellectual equivalent of the general Long March through our institutions that has been conducted so successfully by this radicalized generation. I can remember when I was in graduate school, studying Chinese literature at Columbia University, from 1965 to 1971, being told by fellow graduate students of mine that they were fascinated by the writings of Michel Foucault, a French thinker I had never even heard of. When I started teaching at SUNY Binghamton, in a department of Comparative Literature, I was asked by a colleague whether I had read a book called *Of Grammatology*, by a certain Jacques Derrida, again of France (and, as I later learned, Jewish, like myself), in which he developed some kind of idea about Chinese characters as representing a stage or level of language *anterior* to speech. I admitted that I had not, and that I thought it strange that a man who did not in fact know Chinese or Japanese would put forward a highly suspicious idea based upon the characters used to write these languages. Later, of course, I would discover that Derrida and his followers simply dismissed the idea of *factual knowledge* as a basis for thought: for them, expertise itself was part of the discredited past! The “thinker” is essentially at liberty to “play” with ideas at will, and see where they will take him . . .

Little did I realize that these passing mentions of Foucault and Derrida were harbingers not merely of a burgeoning interest in them and others like them, but of their establishment as the foundational figures in a new and perverted orthodoxy that would sweep through virtually all departments of language and literature, and beyond, within a matter of just a few years.

Because I was not a participant in my generation’s veneration of these men, it took me a very long time indeed to grasp what was happening. On the few occasions that I attempted to read anything by them, I was immediately and thoroughly repelled by the jargon-ridden, and just plain ugly, impenetrable prose that they wrote. I was appalled to think that my contemporaries were *attracted* by this stuff. But I realized that I needed to figure out what was happening, and why. What I hope to share with you are some of my conclusions, arrived at in the course of years of attempting to come to grips with the phenomenon.

To begin with, I think it needs to be recognized that we are faced with a nearly classic example of “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” As my colleague, Emmet Kennedy, a historian of the ideological aspect of the French Revolution, has most cogently put it in a forthcoming book on secularization:

With hindsight, one can assert that universities today are often more concerned as to whether a lecturer is exciting and dynamic than whether he is truthful, because they have largely despaired of teaching the truth. If one proposed searching for the truth in philosophy or literature, for example, one would be considered naive and laughable. On the other hand, if one can wrap lies in a tightly-wound, sophisticated discourse, chances are that it will succeed. But such discourse reveals a lack of ontological nerve. It represents a sophist’s disengagement from what *is* to what *appears*, from Being to Semblance, from Socrates to Protagoras, from Plato’s form to Plato’s shadows.

This statement helps us to position ourselves both historically and philosophically in dealing with the intellectual—and I would argue, moral and even spiritual—catastrophe before us. Kennedy is correct in realizing that Postmodernism, ultimately, represents a reappearance in our time of the ancient error, the ancient heresy, sophistry, as taught in Greece by Protagoras and Gorgias: the claim that there is no reality (anti-ontology) or at least if there is, we can have no access to it (anti-epistemology). These views in antiquity were successfully defeated by Socrates. In their Chinese guise, as argued in the fourth century B.C. by the Chinese *pien-chia* (Hui Tzu, Kung-sun Lung), they were defeated by the Taoist Chuang Tzu

(in one of his modes of argumentation, at least¹) and by Confucianism as a whole. They resurfaced in the Christian era in the form of various heresies, and then with particular power in the Nominalism introduced by William of Occam in the fourteenth century, as shown by Richard Weaver (*Ideas Have Consequences*, 1948). But in the modern era they have resurfaced again, reformulated by thinkers as apparently disparate as Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and even Hume and Locke, all of whom at base represent an epistemological retreat to the perceiving subject. They prepared the ground for the total triumph of sophistry and nominalism in modern thought as a whole, this time without adequate opposition, or rather, that opposition, no matter how effectively articulated, has not been able to win over the entire generation of intellectuals.

Even from such sweeping overviews as this, we can see that the types of literary criticism we are concerned with are underpinned, as are all forms of analysis whatsoever, by the worldview of the practitioners. And this is a worldview of terminal relativism and nihilism. Such destructive, cynical approaches to literature cannot have come about without a prior withdrawal from any acceptance of Being itself on the part of the intellectual class. This is described by Thomas Molnar, in a personal communication, as follows: "All this is part of the modernist scenario, the *rebellion against being*."

But what in fact *are* these types of literary criticism? To begin with, what is deconstructionism? I do not propose at all a careful analysis of Derrida's fantastically turgid, ugly writings, nor do I wish to linger too long on attempts to define his various neologisms, such as *différance*, a purposeful misspelling of *différence*, brilliantly discussed by R. V. Young in his book, *At War with the Word*,² as being Derrida's shorthand for the idea that

¹ I have in mind Chuang Tzu's defeat of Hui Tzu in the famous "joy of fish" debate (see Burton Watson, trans., *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings* [New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1964], 110). As I interpret it, when Hui Tzu asks him *how*, not being a fish, he can know the joy of fish, Chuang Tzu plays Hui Tzu's sophisticated game along with him, defeats him on his own ground—by exploiting the ambiguity of *how* (Chinese *an*), which both in Chinese and in English can either be a rhetorical question, "How can you possibly. . . ?" or a true question, "What means did you employ to learn that?"—and then in the last line triumphantly asserts his access through intuition to direct knowledge of the fish. Elsewhere, of course, Chuang Tzu himself is highly relativistic, but I do not think Chuang Tzu is in fact a systematic, consistent thinker.

² R. V. Young, *At War With the Word: Literary Theory and Liberal Education* (Wilmington, Del.: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 1999), 31–58 passim.

nothing really has a discrete being of its own, and thus no word can really denominate anything real, a form of extreme nominalism that goes beyond Occam's view that only individual entities exist to a denial of the entities themselves. The presentation of this manifestly false claim in the form of a purposely misspelled word makes of Derrida's rhetorical approach the intellectual equivalent of a vanity license plate, which implicitly asks us to admire the driver of the car for his supposed wit because he has misspelled a word or two in phonetic form.

This approach derives most of its specious influence from the exploitation of modern theories of linguistics, such as that of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), which amounts to a claim that the relationship between words and reality is random, or inaccessible to analysis—again, the familiar Sophist claim. Instead, Saussure posits a relationship between "signifier" and "signified," that is, between a word and the meaning one intends to convey, which exists only as the word is articulated—there is ultimately no real distinction between *thought* and *language*. This will-o'-the-wisp of a concept supposedly allows one to analyze linguistic entities without having to posit an uncertain ontological reality. Deconstructionists exploit the idea to "liberate" words from meaning anything fixed, rendering them supposedly vulnerable to infinite manipulation by the interpreter. It also makes it seem plausible when they deny the truth of a metaphor, for example, emphasizing the distinctions between the two terms—tenor and vehicle—rather than the shared essence. Essence, of course, is denied. The epistemological and therefore the linguistic cup is half empty, not half full.

It should be evident that such a view of language is profoundly anti-Christian. To begin with, Christ *is* the Word (Logos). In Genesis 2:19–20, language is presented as God's gift to man. God invites Adam to name the beasts: the power of naming is given by God to man in this event. Thus the proper attitude towards language is wonder and gratitude. Derrida's deriding (I can't avoid a childish pun of my own) of language's utility—let alone its numinousness—is an act of rebellion against the sacred, against God. Of course, with the tower of Babel, the languages of the world are fragmented by God as punishment for man's arrogance. But as the great writer of hymns, St. Romanos Melodos (early 6th century) reminds us in his brilliantly paradoxical *kontakion* for Pentecost,

*When the Holy Ghost descended and confused the tongues,
He divided the nations;
Now that He has distributed the tongues of fire,*

*He has summoned all to unity:
So we praise with one accord the All-Holy Spirit.*³

St. Romanos grasps that the link between language and meaning is finally a spiritual relationship, controlled or mediated by the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost, when the Spirit descends upon the apostles, inspiring them to go forth and evangelize the world, He mysteriously infuses their communications, albeit in different tongues, with a unity of meaning. Thus the relationship between word and meaning is not random at all.

Have any modern linguists attempted to rejuvenate this sacramental view of language for the modern world? Yes, and the key figure is Étienne Gilson (1884–1978), in his great work, *Linguistique et philosophie* (“Linguistics and Philosophy: An Essay on the Philosophical Constants of Language,” 1969; posthumously translated, 1988). One may epitomize Gilson’s view of language as Incarnational. Yes, thought is real and distinct from language, which it pre-exists. And yet it is accessible to us only as articulated in language. The thought is incarnate in the word, a mini-incarnation analogous to the assumption of flesh by spirit in the Incarnation of Christ. Comparable ideas were put forth by American philosopher Charles Peirce (1839–1914) and brilliantly popularized by novelist and essayist, Walker Percy (1916–90) in such books as *Signposts in a Strange Land* (1991). Peirce and Percy both remind us that a full understanding of the relationship between language and the world requires a *tri-adic* model of thing, word, and the mind of the *person* making the connection.

These thinkers have returned the sense of incarnational spirituality to language, as the Russian thinker Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900) returned it to aesthetics with his wonderful definition of beauty as “the transfiguration of matter through the incarnation in it of another, a super-material principle.”⁴ We sense intuitively that such mysteries as language and beauty are, in fact, inaccessible to modes of analysis that omit the element of spirit.

But rather than attempting a technical, point by point rebuttal of what is after all a chameleon of no fixed color, I would like to give a kind of impressionistic idea of

what Deconstructionism is. And here is how I would put it: in the last analysis, Deconstructionists are Leftists who are no longer satisfied to apply their leftist analysis to the actual world, with an emphasis on the sphere of politics. They now apply this same worldview to literature, art, and thought itself. They willfully read a text as they “read” or interpret the world itself. (By the way, the collapse of the distinction between “reading” and “interpreting” is a further rhetorical move by the postmodernists intended to convey that every act of reading is *ipso facto* an act of interpretation; there is no *pure* and therefore *correct* act of reading). But this procedure, so egregiously false to the spirit of the work under study, must not be done overtly. Our intellectuals are nothing, if not *sophisticated*. And in postmodernism in general, mere sophistication has become a kind of terminal disease. Hence the pseudoprofundity of postmodernist writings across the board. Thus the attack on every aspect of tradition: religion, philosophy, social mores, etc., is moved from the realm of actual revolutionary activity, into the realm of analyzing literature. And the means of doing this, as with all sophistry historically, is denial, denial of truth, of the ability of language to capture truth, of any text to say anything at all. Generally speaking, as Young shows, this depends on a prior assumption that any hierarchy of any sort, especially the ontological hierarchy of spirit over matter, is false *a priori*, and/or proof of oppression (of the higher over the lower). This will immediately remind one of Marxism, with its view of all history as class struggle—of the oppressed class against the oppressor class—and that is no coincidence. The ultimate proximate origins of deconstructionism, and indeed of all postmodernism, lie in Marxism. In fact, the whole enterprise can even be explained in large measure as a kind of last-ditch measure by the Marxists, who, realizing their revolutionary enterprise in the real world was a failure, have retreated to a realm they can actually control and “revolutionize,” to their heart’s content. At the same time, Marx’s embarrassing failure to grasp the importance of culture has given way to an attempt by such Marxist thinkers as Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) and Theodor Adorno (1903–69), to reappropriate culture for Marxism by calling for a revolutionization, not so much of the ownership of the means of production (the economic system) as of the culture itself, through subversion of the universities and other cultural institutions, and of the professions of scholarship, literary (art, musical, etc.) criticism, and of editing and publishing. Gramsci and Adorno have, in fact, replaced Marx himself as the inspirational figures underlying this entire movement, helping to render the *culture*, rather than the economic sphere, the real battleground of revolution: it’s the *culture*, stupid.

³ Based on Marjorie Carpenter, *Kontakia of Romanos, Byzantine Melodist*, 2 vols. (Columbia, Mo.: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1970), 1: 361.

⁴ Vladimir Solovyov, “Beauty, Sexuality, and Love,” in *Ultimate Questions: An Anthology of Modern Russian Religious Thought*, ed. Alexander Schmemmann (1965; rpt. Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1977), 75.

In this battle, deconstruction is a perfect weapon. All it really boils down to is a *hostile* interpretation of the great books. They can be seen in a positive light only when, usually *in spite* of the author's actual intentions, certain characters are taken as representations of rebellion or subversion. Thus, in a recently published (by Oxford University Press!) book on Shakespeare, the *witches* are declared to be the actual heroines (whoops, make that "heroes") of *Macbeth*, because they are "strong women"! Or Caliban, in *The Tempest*, is taken as an embodiment of colonized peoples, and thus a figure of sympathy as opposed to the colonizer Prospero, and so forth.⁵

Deconstructionists, of course, will always deny that this (or anything else) is what they are attempting to do. They assert that for them, it is "play" that is all important. I myself have had several interchanges, privately, in person and through e-mail, and publicly, in print and before a roundtable on the then current state (in 1990) of Chinese literature studies at the Association for Asian Studies meeting in Chicago, with Stephen Owen of Harvard University, generally considered our most influential Chinese poetry scholar. Owen had just published a book, *Poetry and the Labyrinth of Desire*, in which he put forward certain basic doctrines of deconstructionism (which, by the way, claims to *lack* any doctrine). For example, "Words . . . do indeed tell the truth, but never the truth we wished to tell or pretended to tell." At the meeting, and later in a published version of my remarks,⁶ I pointed out the self-contradictory nature of such a statement. Or again, "Humor exposes the emptiness beneath all value and intensities . . ." Besides being, again, self-

contradictory, this displays the deconstructionist attempt to elevate humor—actually, ironical cynicism—to the position once occupied by philosophy itself. The claim is, by "deconstructing," i.e., hostilely analyzing the text, I can smirk at anything it puts forward, or I can discover characters or personae in the text who can be interpreted as doing so to others who represent the "establishment," and thus through my interpretation, I can conquer or appropriate the text, away from the author—who is a mere construct anyway. God is dead; so is the author. Every shred of the text ultimately derives from some socioeconomic causative agent, such as class relations, ownership of the means of production, or power, purely and simply. All literature is thus merely about power; who has it, who is trying to get it, period. Any order is seen as oppressive; therefore, *disorder* is preferable. So long as everything is in disorder, there can be no oppression of one group by another.

Just as Richard Rorty absolutizes what he calls "liberal irony," Owen and others like him present themselves as cosmic clowns, playing a game by their own rules, having relinquished the foolish attempt to get at truth, and claiming to "see through" everything. In their hands, rather than the sources of meaning that they have always been, the classics are now taken to be fodder for the mill of nihilism. The clowning of such critics, therefore, is really a dance of death on the grave of civilization. Not only are they *not* funny at all, they misconstrue the very nature of irony itself. Effective irony, of course, can never be absolute; it must recognize something that transcends the reach of irony, as pointed out long ago by G. K. Chesterton. But the denial of the transcendent in general is precisely the problem we are dealing with here.

A further point needs to be made, in connection with this strangely humorless protestation that game-playing is the highest form of literary criticism. One gathers that a certain percentage of such intellectuals, rather than being fervently committed to revolution, have simply become bored. They think it is more "fun" to make fun of the classics, than it is to take a reverent attitude toward them. Beyond this, they have become impatient with the very idea of truth. Dr. Johnson saw this coming in the thinking of the "skeptical innovators" of the eighteenth century—specifically, Hume—and pointed out to his friend and biographer, James Boswell, that they are vain men, and that "Truth will not afford sufficient food to their vanity; so they have betaken themselves to error. *Truth, Sir, is a cow which will yield such people no more milk, and so they are gone to milk the bull.*"⁷

⁵ The Caliban claim has become commonplace; it occurs, along with a plethora of other, mostly feminist (mis)interpretations, in a book called, simply, *Shakespeare*, by none other than Germaine Greer (!), and published, again, by Oxford Univ. Press (1986); for an excellent analysis of her numerous errors, see the review by Ronald Berman, "Mistress of Deceit," in *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture*, 11.4 (April 1987): 31–32. Alas, I am citing the other book, with the statement about the Weird Sisters, from memory, and cannot now identify it precisely. Closely parallel arguments, however, are presented in H. W. Fawkey, *Deconstructing Macbeth* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1990). This book, in fact, is an excellent example of the mere reversal of common sense by which critics of this stripe often achieve their effects: "subversion" and "transgression" are always good, the established order always bad—not so much moral relativism, perhaps, as moral *inversion*.

⁶ Jonathan Chaves, "'Increasingly We Meet Only Ourselves': Thoughts on the Chinese Literature Roundtable at the AAS Meeting, April 7, 1990," *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews* 13 (1991): 77–82.

⁷ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 268–69.

Because such an approach can obviously lead to, or rather presupposes, a complete lack of interest in the actual historical context out of which the text emerged, a pure willfulness in which the interpreter superimposes his will on that of the author or the civilization which produced the book—and indeed even *prides* himself on this posture, there was an apparent reaction which led to the emergence, in the 80s, of a supposedly new approach to literature, the so-called “New Historicism,” led among others by Stephen Greenblatt at Berkeley (now holding a joint appointment at Harvard as well). This looks at first like a praiseworthy attempt to return to historical responsibility, but turns out to be just another turn of the Marxist screw. For example, as Paul Cantor points out in his wonderful and essential analysis of New Historicism,⁸ Greenblatt writes of *The Tempest* in terms that imply, or come close to stating directly, that Shakespeare was complicit in the (assumedly evil) colonial exploitation of—Virginia, by the Virginia Company! “Shakespeare ends up reduced in our eyes, transformed into a kind of Renaissance Ivan Boesky,” as Cantor puts it. This is nothing more nor less than an application of Marxist analysis not to a given society but to a literary work, to a great play. The underlying ideology—Marxism—is false. The premise is false. And so the conclusion is worse than useless. It is blatantly prideful and destructive. A civilization one of whose most respected institutions harbors and supports the articulator of such ideas is seriously degenerated and decadent, by definition.

In the twisted claim that the witches are the true heroines of *Macbeth*, we have already had a prime example of feminist criticism, in some ways the easiest to refute of this congeries of poisonous ideologies, but at the same time the most dangerous to confront, because not only has it become universal in the professoriate, but the students themselves have reached the point where the only way they can read a work of literature is by vigilantly detecting each and every lapse against feminist orthodoxy. I recall how, about four years ago, I was sitting in on a lecture by a colleague of mine in a course we team-teach, “Asian Humanities.” My colleague, a highly respected Indologist, presented the text of a wonderful Tamil poem from South India, in which the poet encounters the goddess of death on a beach. One of the students—an A student, I might add, and the holder of an internship at the White House who would later be honored in the pages of a nationally prominent magazine—rose to ask, “Whether all Indian writers despised women?” My poor colleague was too stunned by this

non sequitur of a question to respond, but I stood (this was a large class, with about thirty students), and pointed out that the mere fact of the woman on the beach being the goddess of death did not equate to the entire civilization hating women in general. The student, of course, had merely applied, unwittingly, the Marxist-cum-feminist doctrine that in literature, as in real life, each person is not so much an individual person (something which is, anyway, a mere “construct”) as he is a representative of the *group* to which he belongs. In classical Marxist analysis, a bourgeois man represents the entire bourgeoisie (one is “stamped with the stamp of class” in all aspects of consciousness). This concept of “typical” characters was famously articulated by Engels in his well-known “Letter to Margaret Harkness” (1888), the English Socialist and novelist. In the feminist appropriation of this sort of thing, a man also represents all men, or all maleness, a woman, all women. And of course, to bring in the third of this unholy trinity of class, sex, and race, a white person represents the entire white race, etc. That such a doctrine is poison to any rational analysis of literature, let alone reality, should be obvious. But it is not, to the benighted age in which we live.

All such modes of analysis are finally attempts to escape the particularity of the individual person, possessed of free will, and moral responsibility. As Carol Iannone, one of the few writers to tackle feminist criticism head-on, has put it: “Feminist anger is aimed at those who transgress the feminist analysis of the female condition by emphasizing individual responsibility in the face of difficult circumstances rather than blaming outside forces, and by placing ultimate significance upon qualities like moral insight, emotional growth, and spiritual strength rather than on the more material kinds of power and identity favored by feminists.”⁹ Thus the entire project is part of the flight from responsibility, implying as it does a higher, authoritative moral code of some kind *to which* one must be responsible.

The aspect of moral responsibility which modernity seems most anxious to escape is that involving sex. We all know that modernity is simply obsessed with sex, an obsession given intellectual respectability by Freud and his followers—and detractors as well. This is where Foucault comes in. As we speak, he is probably the single most influential figure in a mode of literary criticism that looks at literary works in terms of how they present “the body,” as opposed to the mind, the heart, and the soul that have been addressed by all previous modes of criticism. One may open at random any program of any

⁸ Paul A. Cantor, “Stephen Greenblatt’s New Historicist Vision,” *Academic Questions* 6.4 (Fall, 1993): 21–36 passim.

⁹ Carol Iannone, “Is There a Woman’s Perspective in Literature?” *Academic Questions* 7.1 (Winter, 1993–94): 74.

academic conference in the humanities or social sciences and find titles like "Pluralism, Transgender Practices . . . in Indonesia and Malaysia" (from the program of the AAS meeting in Washington, D.C. in April of 2002), where we recognize the hand of Foucault in the fascination with the idea that there are multiple "genders," not just masculinity and femininity, with the further implication that these are not innate in nature (which is essentially denied here), but "constructed," hence also the plethora of titles about "constructing," "deconstructing," "reconstructing," etc. And all of this applied here not to literature but to actual society. Again, both are artificial constructions, so the same "criticism" can be applied to both.

Foucault was homosexual, and much of what he does in his writings is calculated to advance the agenda of legitimating homosexuality. He sees any attempt to define heterosexuality as normal, and homosexuality as perverted, as being oppressive (like any attempt to define sanity as normal, and insanity as perverted or abnormal, another obsession of Foucault's; thus we can see that the real attack is on any conception of normalcy at all as being "oppressive"). All such categories are arbitrary expressions of power, an idea shared in common with feminism and Marxism itself, the ultimate source. That is why another title from the AAS conference is worded thus: "Woman Uncovered: Pornography and Power in the Detective Fiction of Kirino Natsuo." Note the cute double entendre of "woman uncovered," which will serve as an example of the sophomoric, wise-guy humor that has become so characteristic of our intellectuals. I recall attending an AAS meeting at which a paper was presented on pornographic Japanese prints of the Edo period. These, we were told, demonstrated "commodification": the bodies of the women were reduced to objects for masturbation and for sale because of the proto-capitalistic economic system of the period! The presenter thus neatly stitched together Marxism, feminism, and a type of New Historicism based on Foucault in one truly repulsive—and utterly absurd—witches' brew. I recall contemplating asking the speaker if he thought there was no masturbation in socialist societies, but decided against it. After all, how can one be wittily ironic when every single statement is understood to be ironic? When everything is ironic, irony collapses.

Such approaches to literature have so dominated the Modern Language Association, the gigantic professional organization of scholars of literature, as well as all other related professional organizations, that alternative organizations have actually appeared, against all expectation. In literature, this has been ALSC, the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, formed in 1994 by such distinguished figures as John Ellis, author of *Against*

Deconstruction (1989)—which was probably the first attempt to mount a critique of fashionable literary criticism from within the academy—John Hollander, Paul Cantor, and Joseph Brodsky, to name just a few. The membership of this organization grew rapidly to some 2200 (as of 2002), and in 1998, they were able to bring out a journal, *Literary Imagination*, intended as an alternative to the *PMLA*. Alas, however, even the ALSC has tended to bifurcate into two camps, those like myself who stand firmly opposed to the whole postmodernist movement—we might be seen as the "traditionalist conservatives"—and those, the apparent majority and certainly the leadership of the organization, who seem willing to make an accommodation with the "more responsible" wing of the postmodernist movement. They would be the "Neo-cons" of ALSC.

Indeed one abiding problem raised by the whole situation, especially for those of us who are believing Christians, has been and remains this: is "postmodernism" good or bad news for us? It might seem strange that I would even raise such a question, after this entirely negative presentation, but I do so because of the argument, put forth especially by various writers for the journal, *First Things*—most notably, J. Bottum in an article of 1994¹⁰—and echoed, I am afraid, even in R. V. Young's otherwise excellent book, *At War With the Word*, that at least postmodernism has acted the part of a healthy corrosive of the excessive rationalism of the modern age, thus clearing the ground for resanctification. I do not wish to repeat here the arguments against this position I put forth in a letter to *First Things*, and published by them,¹¹ but I will summarize the matter in this way:

First of all, modernity is not an age of mere rationalism. It *appears* to be, because of the triumph of science. But as Chesterton realized, and as Stanley Jaki has shown in his books (such as *The Absolute Beneath the Relative* (1988), *The Only Chaos* (1988), *The Saviour of Science* (1990), etc.), moderns have tended to explain scientific discoveries in a nominalistic manner—that is to say, they have been good at physics, but bad at metaphysics, or have failed to recognize the distinction at all. And as Richard Weaver noted in his book, *Ideas Have Consequences*, the "philosophic position of modernism" is actually one of "the sheerest relativism . . . [T]he very notion of eternal verities is repugnant to the modern temper. . . . The most vocal part of modern impiety is the freely expressed contempt for the past . . . [M]odernism

¹⁰ J. Bottum, "Christians and Postmoderns," *First Things* 40 (Feb., 1994): 28–32.

¹¹ Jonathan Chaves, letter, *First Things* 44 (June/July, 1994): 6–7.

encourages . . . rebelliousness."¹² Thus there is a yearning for disorderly fragmentation lurking at the base of the modern soul, and explicitly expressed in such documents as the *Surrealist manifestos* of André Breton, issued in the 1920's. *Anti-rationalism*, in fact, is the real posture of modernity, and Deconstructionism et al. are thus in full accord with it.

Secondly, no Christian should gleefully attack reason. The Church Fathers fully grasped that reason itself was a gift of God, and that human reason was an icon of divine wisdom. As St. Gregory of Nazianzus (329–89) put it in one of his fine theological poems (trans. by John McGuckin):

You enlightened the mind of man
With reason and with wisdom
And so placed an ikon here below
Of the brightness that is above. . . .¹³

That is why, as G. K. Chesterton insightfully—indeed, almost prophetically—wrote in 1926, “It’s the first effect

¹² Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (1948; rpt. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984), 52–53, 87.

¹³ John McGuckin, trans., *Saint Gregory Nazianzen: Selected Poems* (Convent of the Incarnation, Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, 1986), 11.

of not believing in God that you lose your common sense and can't see things as they are,” words spoken by his Catholic priest-detective, Father Brown (“The Oracle of the Dog”).

Yes, common sense and Christianity go together. The Deconstructionists understand this perfectly well; that is why they attack both equally, and in the same way, both in the real world, and in the reflection of the real world in the world of literature.

How much hope is there for a return to sanity? If I am right in seeing postmodernist literary criticism as an epiphenomenon of a deep, underlying spiritual crisis, then we find ourselves faced with the same kind of challenge addressed by Alexandr Solzhenitsyn in *From Under the Rubble* (1975). One of the most prescient men of our age, he acknowledges that there can be no public policy solutions to a crisis that involves each individual human soul, and requires nothing less than *metanoia* on the personal level. It is, perhaps, a *real* irony that both capitalist and socialist worlds find themselves facing the same spiritual crisis, as Solzhenitsyn pointed out in his great Harvard speech of June 8, 1978, but they do, because it is the crisis of modernity: the flight from God (Max Picard). Only a return to God will allow a return to sanity in literary criticism, as in everything else.

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