

THEOLOGY AND LITERATURE

Diana Culbertson, O.P., presented a paper entitled "Theology and Theory: The Post-Modern Dilemma," arguing that the theological response to postmodern linguistic theory has been weak or nonexistent. Mr. Thomas Werge of the University of Notre Dame also presented a paper on "The Catholic Tradition and Modern Literary Gnostics." What follows is a summary of Professor Culbertson's paper.

Language theory, Culbertson notes, now powerfully influences every aspect of university education, from textbook selection to the hiring and promotion of faculty. Moreover, contemporary language theory and literary criticism have profound theological and religious implications. Not since the advent of existential thought, which was more easily amenable to Christian interpretation, has an intellectual movement evoked such radical questioning, or altered modes of thinking so profoundly.

What seem not to be available in this conversion are (Catholic) theological voices. At the December 1990 meeting of the AAR in New Orleans, David Landry praised Sallie McFague's *Models of God* as a serious effort by a theologian to respond to the Derridean phenomenon. But he claimed that, except for David Tracy's *Plurality and Ambiguity*—which does not take up the deconstructive methodological issues in depth—McFague's was the only mainstream theological response. Can theology be justified in proceeding with business as usual, Landry asks, without coming to grips with such a major contemporary movement as deconstruction?

To respond to Derrida requires that we understand what he argues. Accused of declaring that there is nothing beyond language, Derrida has denied emphatically that deconstruction is a suspension of reference or that we are "imprisoned in language." What Derrida argues is that language complicates the question of reference more than traditional theories assume. His critique of logocentrism is based on a search for the "other" of language, the absence that is a consequence of every sign.

The whole question of language and referent exemplifies the theological problems posed by contemporary theory. The concept of reference is crucial to theological discourse. If, as Derrida has argued, language (like any sign system) refers as much to absence as to presence, theologians need to examine what is excluded or deferred in both their own discourses and in creedal statements and their inherited theological traditions. Part of Catholic-Protestant disagreement on the nature of the eucharist, for instance, can be traced to the privileging of presence, whereas the eucharist bears all the traces of the absence of Jesus in history, as well as his mysterious presence. In neglecting the function and limitations of sign, we

neglect the whole apophatic tradition in its theological as well as its mystical import.

Theological discourse is often considered to be primarily "referential" discourse. That assumption is itself problematic. Here one can only suggest that the nature of theological language is not generally understood by scholars in other disciplines, even in the humanities, which may explain why theology is in disrepute in some corners of the academic world. Surely that vulnerability requires attention.

While deconstruction as a methodology does exemplify many postmodern critical problems, it is not the only issue at stake in contemporary theory. Besides the problematics of meaning in textual discourse are such issues as the existence of the subject (both authorial and inquiring), the possibility of transcendence, and the adjudication of value.

First, the subject. Influenced by Foucault, the New Historicists, especially Stephen Greenblatt, would argue that the self is more effect than origin. Similarly, Lacan has argued that the self is irremediably split, once it enters the world of language. The prelinguistic infant experiences wholeness or *jouissance*. But when the child learns to symbolize, the speaking "I" or *je* is divided from the *moi*. David Fisher, in his contribution to the book *Lacan and Theological Discourse*, observes that the liberal theological tradition has a strong stake in modes of analysis that would preserve the integrity of consciousness. On the other hand, if we concede the "dissolution of the subject," as criticism influenced by Lacan and Foucault assumes, we subvert the basis of most of transcendental Thomism, and raise extremely important issues for foundational theology. If the self, like meaning, is indeterminate and undetermining, how can we assume that an ethical response to language is possible?

Next, the denial of the transcendent. This critical issue is inextricably linked to the problem of meaning, as it is to the question of the self. If Truth (or the imagined truth) is not the referent, if the Signified is forever deferred, it could be argued that desire has no object that is not illusory, and God is not. Moreover if there is no extratextual authority for interpretation, theology is in serious difficulty, since the assumption that texts bear on extratextual reality is fundamental to theological reflection.

Finally, the adjudication of value, the most sensitive issue to be discussed here. Can literary texts be judged to be more or less beautiful, significant, or valuable to a given culture? Or are such judgments impossible and by definition oppressive? On what basis are they made? If we should decide that hierarchies of value are nothing more than disguised power structures, are we surrendering to a naive relativism, or merely substituting one power structure for another? Or are we simply acknowledging the carnival of voices that must replace an elitist Eurocentric culture?

What is ironic in the present literary-critical scene is the ease with which literary theorists implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) theologize without any suspicion that they will ever be interrupted by theologians. Catholic theologians, as well as critics and writers, need to address the issues raised by new historicists, Lacanian psychoanalysts, Foucaultians, Lyotardians, antihistorical structuralists, a/theologians, deconstructionists, reader-response relativists, and antirhetorical

readers—even if this post-modern surrealism turns out to be tomorrow's historical footnote.

Victor Brombert, in his lucid (and liberating) presidential address to the Modern Language Association in 1989, saw the threat of "new forms of dogmatism" in the multiplicity of assumptions, approaches, and doctrines in literary criticism. More was at stake, he maintained, than the concerns of academic specialists and their disciples. Rather, the question of criticism "involves the age-old struggle against meaninglessness and mortality."

Theologians have long prided themselves on their competence to discuss both meaning and mortality. But in the literary-critical world, with which Culbertson is familiar, that competence is unrecognized and unacknowledged. If theology is unpopular, Culbertson notes, religious thinking is not. At least one theologian has asserted recently that "sensitive inquirers now go to nontheological arenas to discover the presence of contemporary religious thinking."

Culbertson reported that last fall she attended an international conference on religion and literature, during which numerous humanities scholars were engaged in finding the links between poetics and theology. When she asked the conference director at the end of the three or four day program what he thought of the proceedings, he looked around at the several hundred participants, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Where are the theologians?"

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