

PRIVILEGING THE PARTICULAR

Postmodernism and the Eclipse of the Universal

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We have lost the harmony with which we were created, the internal harmony between our spiritual and physical being. We have lost the clarity of spirit that was ours when the concepts of Good and Evil had yet to become a subject of ridicule, shoved aside by the principle of fifty-fifty... And nothing speaks more of the current helplessness of our spirit, of our intellectual disarray, than the loss of a clear and calm attitude toward death. The greater his well-being, the deeper cuts the chilling fear of death into the soul of modern man. This mass fear, a fear the ancients did not know, was born of our insatiable, loud, and bustling life. Man has lost the sense of himself as a limited point in the universe, albeit one possessing free will. He began to think himself the centre of his surroundings, not adapting himself to the world, but the world to himself. And then, of course, the thought of death becomes unbearable: it is the extinction of the entire universe at a stroke... Having refused to recognise the unchanging Higher Power above us, we have filled the space with personal imperatives, and suddenly life becomes a harrowing prospect indeed. (Solzhenitsyn, 1995:10)

These sober words came from the lips of the renowned author of the *Gulag Archipelago*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who, after nearly twenty years of exile in the United States, returned to Russia in 1994 at the invitation of the Russian President Boris Yeltsin. These words, which

were spoken originally at the International Academy of Philosophy at Schaan, appeared in print in an article in the *New Perspectives Quarterly* entitled "The Excommunication of God". Their romantic allusions to some Golden Age now vanished notwithstanding, these words, as is the title of the article, are diagnostic of the cultural temperament and predilection of late modernity, or, as some prefer, post-modernity. That we inhabit a "post-culture" – post-Holocaust, post-industrial, post-humanist, post-liberal, and now post-modern – is perhaps in part the expression of the restlessness in our collective psyche to which the Russian writer points. But this prefix, which subjects our culture as well as all its diverse manifestations to all kinds of supersessions, must be taken seriously because in it is to be found the ideological description of that culture, so that what we have before us is not some reflexive and vague signification of the close of an old era and the emergence of a new one, but a quasi-systematic articulation of this paradigmatic change. Hence, the prefix also points to the suffix. We deal therefore not only with a general consensual term, like "postmodern", but with "postmodern-ism", an ideology.

If this judgement is sound, then it becomes imperative that close study be made of the nature and claims of postmodernism. But this exercise is from the very outset fraught with many difficulties. What indeed is postmodernism? Attempts to answer this question have come mainly from two fronts. Both lay emphasis on the prefix, the first arguing that it points to that which is exhausted, and that which is in decay. The prefix also points to the parasitic nature of the condition which does not have the capacity for self-definition as well as self-determination, but is essentially dependent on a now flaccid cultural force. Hence Charles Newman's cynical description of postmodernism as "a band of vainglorious contemporary artists following the circus elephants of Modernism with snow shovels." (Conner, 1989:65) Those coming from the other front, Ihab Hassan and Jean-François Lyotard, to name just two, argue to the contrary that the prefix signals the decline and fall of modernism, and the birth of a new age: the emergence of a new and powerful cultural energy, which promises emancipation and awakening from the past.

So, what is postmodernism? Perhaps the answer is truly found in the prefix, which points to the complexity of this cultural and intellectual phenomenon. For the prefix signifies both the iconoclastic and promotional elements in the movement: postmodernism, in all its bravado

and all its rhetoric of dissociation with modernism, stands nevertheless in a peculiar relationship with it, so that the vestiges of the latter continue from time to time to reappear, despite the denials and protests of postmodernists. Perhaps a brief examination of the relationship between modernism and postmodernism would help to set the stage for the ensuing discussion.

Charles Jencks, the most prominent crusader for postmodern architecture, could announce with unwavering confidence that "Modern Architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3.32 pm." (Conner, 1989:69) He was referring to the demolition of the infamous Pruitt-Igoe housing scheme, after it had suffered energetic vandalism by its frustrated inhabitants. To Jencks this signals the revolt of pluralism against the hegemony of modernity, the symbolic eradication of the trenchant "univalence" of modern architecture – of buildings which project one unified theme – and the triumph of "multi-valence". While many postmodernists would in the main agree with Jencks's characterization of postmodernism, not many could point to its emergence with such exactitude. A more cautious, and perhaps more accurate account, comes from Andreas Huyssens, who prefers to speak of a "slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change in sensibility for which the term 'post-modern'" adequately describes. Huyssens is careful to stress, in his 1984 article, that one cannot yet say that postmodernism is a "wholesale paradigm shift of the cultural, social, and economic orders", and that any such claim would be "overblown". Nevertheless, it is an important and prominent change in Western cultural sensibility, a transformation which "distinguishes a post-modern set of assumptions, experiences and propositions from that of a previous period." (Harvey, 1990:39) Sharing that same guardedness, Hassan, who although undoubtedly recognising the distinctiveness of the postmodern condition, would at the same time maintain that there is some continuity between it and the preceding era. Hence he could write in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (1971) that "[t]he postmodern spirit lies coiled within the great corpus of modernism... It is not really a matter of chronology: Sade, Jarry, Breton, Kafka acknowledge that spirit." (Bertens, 1995:40) thus implying that post-modernism, in its embryonic form, had been in the womb of modernity for much longer than is customarily acknowledged.

This of course makes periodisation very difficult. It also provokes some very important questions: Does postmodernism represent a break

from modernism or is it a revolt from within? Is it a matter of style or is it a matter of periodisation? If Hassan's account is in fact accurate, then is it not better to call the new sensibility para-modernism, rather than post-modernism? Be that as it may, most postmodernists would agree that postmodernism is "for the most part... a wilful and rather chaotic movement to overcome all the supposed ills of modernism." (Harvey 1989:115) Postmodernity is therefore not a monolithic cultural phenomenon, and postmodernism is not a simple unified ideology, but is itself characterized by multivalence. Furthermore, and this serves only to compound the problem, because postmodernism as an ideology is both descriptive and prescriptive, its formulations do not always correspond with the cultural reality of the postmodern. This does not mean that characterizing postmodernism is impossible. It is not; and this essay is devoted to the discussion of one such characteristic of postmodern philosophy, its over emphasis on the particular, with the concomitant error of marginalising the absolute. But first let us attend to some of the other characteristics of the postmodern condition.

As an ideology, postmodernism represents, according to some commentators, that flamboyant rejection of the Enlightenment project and its technological ideals. The schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism are tabled very clearly in some literature on the subject. (Harvey, 1989:43) If the mood of modernism is that of romanticism and symbolism, that of postmodernism is typified by parapsysics and Dadaism. If modernism stresses the importance of the form, with the corresponding appeal to the conjunctive and the closed, postmodernism prefers the antiform, and, correspondingly, the disjunctive and the open. If modernism champions design and hierarchy, postmodernism celebrates chance and anarchy. And if modernism tends towards determinacy and transcendence, postmodernism tends towards indeterminacy and immanence. Postmodernism therefore accepts the ephemereal, the fragmentation, the discontinuity and the chaotic. To be sure, these are found in modernism as well. But unlike modernism, which seeks to overcome and surmount these exigencies, postmodernism makes no attempts to transcend them, but instead submits to them in an act of fatalistic surrender. Thus, there can be found in postmodernism that Nietzschean nihilism at work. Indeed, many postmodernists have canonised Nietzsche as their patron saint. The latter's pronouncement that modernism has failed, that it is struggling to survive in a sea of destruction, alienation and despair, struck a cord with postmodernist

thinkers who also see nothing but chaos, and who eschew the very idea of progress, an idea so dear to modernity. The Enlightenment concept of truth and rationality were also rejected by Nietzsche. Conceptualization does not lead to the comprehension of the world, which is made up of different fragments. Rather it destroys the multiplicity and plurality of reality and yields not knowledge of reality but its falsification. Rejecting Kant's transcendental idealism, Nietzsche postulates that knowledge is illusory being nothing but the arbitrary creations of man and that "truth" exists only in certain specific linguistic contexts because it is itself merely a function of language. This signals the death of God, that is to say, the total displacement of that overarching metaphysics which provides the fundamental hermeneutic to all of reality, along with the debunking of the Christian meta-narrative, and conceptions of punishment and rewards. In their place stands that primitive quest for self-preservation and survival which Nietzsche calls "the will to power". This, according to Nietzsche, has resulted in the emergence of a new order, that of the *Übermensch*.

This Nietzschean denial of the reliability of knowledge and Enlightenment rationality which postmodern philosophy endorses does not mean that the latter has no epistemic concerns. Indeed, postmodern philosophy is profoundly anxious about the relationship between man and his environment. The rejection of Enlightenment epistemology has allowed for what some call the emergence of a new Gnosticism whose transformative power (according to Hassan for instance) is deemed to be much greater than even seminal thinkers like Copernicus, Darwin, Marx and Freud could ever imagine. This is surely an exaggeration. But the immanentism of the postmodernist standpoint urges the notion of the absorption of the world by consciousness, with the result that Mind becomes its own reality, and consciousness becomes all. This immanentism ascribes the mind with the capacity to generalize itself in relation to the world and the self so that it becomes more immediate to its own environment, eventually removing both the ontic and noetic distance between the perceiver and that which is perceived. What this means is that man is now that gnostic and language animal who constitutes both himself and the universe by the symbols that he creates. In the nexus of immanence and indeterminacy, that which is signified is swallowed by the signifier in an indeterminate number of language games. In relation to postmodern literature, Hassan could speak of the "literature of silence", in which words have cut themselves off from

things, "and that language can now only refer to language." (Bertens, 1995:44) The philosophical implication of this is that truths, if indeed they exist, cannot be specified, and the notions of the meta-language, meta-narrative or meta-theory must be repudiated, since they are based on the erroneous presupposition that correlation and representation are possible. It is to this aspect of postmodern philosophy, namely, its incredulity towards the transcendental and its implications for theology, that we must now direct our attention.

With the publication of *La Condition Postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* in 1979 [English translation 1984], Jean-François Lyotard, the French philosopher from the Institute Polytechnique de Philosophie of the Université de Paris in Vincennes, France, provided academics and theorists with a systematic and eloquent description of the postmodern condition and perspective, thereby putting postmodernism on the intellectual map. As the subtitle of the work suggests, *The Postmodern Condition* is the study of "the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies." (Lyotard, 1984:xxiii) The preliminary observations made by Lyotard regarding the direction in which post-industrial societies are heading seem to echo that of other theorists. The central concern in most advanced economies is no longer the manufacture of goods, but information. This will lead to what is called the "computerization of society" in which knowledge becomes an "informational commodity" with the result that science now becomes an instrument in the hands of power. (46) Lyotard's main concern in this book is scientific discourse and knowledge – the social and political ramifications of the postmodern condition are placed very much in the background. More specifically, Lyotard is concerned with the function of narratives in science, not so much in scientific knowledge and procedures as such, but rather "in the forms by which such knowledge and procedures gain or claim legitimacy." (Conner, 1989:28) The book was able to exert such great influence because it is seen as a crossroad where the ongoing debates in areas as diverse as politics, economics and aesthetics intersect; it became the ideological reference point for academics and theorists.

Lyotard's *point de départ* is the demise of metanarratives, which he defines as those transcendental and universal truths which underpin Western civilization, giving it not only the hermeneutics for reality but also the basis for the objective legitimation of that civilization. He writes:

I will use the term to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth. For example, the rule of consensus between the sender and addressee of a statement with truth-value is deemed acceptable if it is cast in terms of possible unanimity between rational minds: this is the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end – universal peace... Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. (1984:xxiii-iv)

Social bonds in primitive societies, explains Lyotard, are established by internalized rules or "pragmatics" which are transmitted through popular narratives. Since the eighteenth century, science, according to Lyotard, has been struggling against this form of narrative, which is the principal way in which a society, culture or collectivity has been legitimating itself. Scientific knowledge and language are different from the "language games" of culture being denotative rather than narrative. This in turn implies that the "classical conception of the pragmatics of scientific knowledge" requires an entirely different structure of authorisation and legitimation, one which is based on truth-value and objectivity and not on superstition, prejudice or barbarity. (27) Now, since the form of scientific knowledge is different from that which constitute societal bonds, the question of legitimation for science also takes on a different dimension, one which has to do with the reason for its very existence in human culture – why should there be scientific activity at all? It is here that science resorts to narrative since this is the only way that it can justify itself. The two narratives which science becomes dependent on are the political and philosophical, the first inherited from the French Enlightenment embodied in the ideals of the French Revolution, and the second from German Idealism, particularly the philosophy of Hegel. Both are "narratives of emancipation" which legitimises science, the first representing the emancipation of humanity from slavery and oppression – science is supposed to have played a central part in this process towards absolute freedom. The legitimating instance of the second is the principle of universal knowledge, the philosophy of history which yields the realisation of Reason in the sciences. (Bertens, 1995:125) Both are "metanarratives", that universal story which delineates purpose, and, by implication, provides legitimation. Science therefore finds itself entangled in a profound paradox, rejecting narratives on the one hand and embracing metanarrative on the other.

Since the Second World War, a steady but significant loss of confidence in the legitimating power of grand narratives in science is witnessed, a situation which has resulted in the displacement of the regulating paradigms in science. This splintering of science has shifted the goal of research from truth to "performativity". Lyotard welcomes the advance gardism of postmodern science, with all its plurality and incompatible language games flourishing side by side.

Postmodern science – by concerning itself with such things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, "fracta", catastrophes, and paradigmatic paradoxes – is theorising its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical. It is changing the meaning of the word *knowledge*, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known, but the unknown. And it suggests a model of legitimation that has nothing to do with maximised performance, but has as its basis difference understood as paralogy. (Lyotard, 1984:60)

This state of affairs has issued in two inevitable results. The first is that there can be no way of regulating research and science itself, and the second is that new paradigm shifts and innovations will emerge. Lyotard celebrates this diversity which he argues should not only cause us to "gaze in wonderment", but sensitise us to difference and enable us to "tolerate the incommensurable." (1984:xxv) But can there not be found in this diversity any consensus at all? Lyotard, who postulates an outright war against totality, would answer this question with an emphatic "No". Consensus, according to Lyotard, spells the end of freedom and indeed of thought itself; it prevents us from extending ourselves beyond our possibilities. If apparent consensus is achieved, it must be seen as "a particular *state* of the discussion, not its end." The anti-representationalism of Lyotard's postmodernism could only hail dissensus as the proper emancipation of culture and thought. In the field of science, this means that the only end proper to it is paralogy. Thus in contradistinction from the Habermasian consensus in which communicative action is founded on universally valid claims based on reason and where communication must assume the presence of comprehensibility, truth, truthfulness and rightness, the radical anti-representationalism of Lyotard points to the heterogeneity of language games which struggle with each other and themselves in a matrix of plurality. In this "diaspora" of knowledge from the centralise control of the metanarrative, cultural universalism (which is equated by Lyotard with cultural imperialism) is ousted. Hence, in his essay entitled "Missive on Universal History", Lyotard rejects questions like "Should we continue

to understand the multiplicity of social and nonsocial phenomena in the light of the Idea of a universal history of mankind?" because the way it is phrased, particularly with its use of the word "we", is a form of grammatical violence. Lyotard argues that we must wean ourselves from the word "we" – that universal arbiter or basis of legitimation. "Instead we must embrace and promote every form of cultural diversity, without recourse to universal principles." (Connor, 1989:37) Culturally, this has supposedly led to the liberation of those communities which have suffered oppression and marginalisation under a certain political and social metanarrative. So both gays and feminists, for example, have eagerly embraced this pluralistic stance of postmodernism which makes every form of master discourse illegitimate and which emphasises the right of every group to speak for themselves in their own voices.

Criticisms of Lyotard's proposal come from many quarters, including some postmodern philosophers like Richard Rorty. Space permits but a brief treatment of these objections. The most fundamental objection has to do with the inconsistency of Lyotard's argument. For can it not be said that what we see in *The Postmodern Condition* is a form of metanarrative about the demise of metanarratives? Geoff Bennington has argued persuasively that by insisting that metanarratives have everywhere collapsed on the one hand, and that metanarratives were dominant before the postmodern era on the other hand, Lyotard's method is doubly totalising. (1988:114-17) In Lyotard we see the dogmatic insistence on the end of dogma. Lyotard has also consistently misapplied the proposals of Thomas Kuhn. While Kuhn, in his seminal work entitled *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970) talks about paradigmatic changes or revolutions in science throughout its history, Lyotard applies it exclusively to postmodern science, thereby giving the false impression of the uniqueness of the postmodern condition. Rorty has rejected Lyotard's extremist position regarding the impossibility of consensus, which the latter must maintain, given his obsessive war against totality. To Rorty, this absolute incompatibility would mean that it would be impossible for one to learn the language of another culture, in which case one would not have enough knowledge of that language to say that it is incompatible with his own. These criticisms notwithstanding, Lyotard has succeeded in turning attention away from a totalitarian perception of reality and directing it to the micro-narratives or language games of communities. This has not only changed our understanding of knowledge, but also our perception of language. The postmodern

philosopher who has exerted far reaching influence in contemporary reflection on the nature of language in the West is Jacques Derrida, and it is to him that we now must turn.

While Lyotard attacks grand narratives, Derrida, the Sorbonne philosopher who enjoys great popularity in America, attacks what he calls Western "logocentrism", that philosophy of language which postulates the *logos* (especially the written word) as the carrier of meaning. This "metaphysics of presence", which has provided Western philosophy with an ontology of language, in which language points to the essence of being, and objectively signifies reality, must, according to Derrida, be rejected as an illusion. Language, insists Derrida, does not have any fixed meaning – it does not represent reality as the realists and the representationalists would have us believe. Language is not that transcendental signifier pointing to the transcendental signified. This onto-theological tradition which proposes the "myth of presence" must be repudiated. Derrida proposes a linguistics or a grammatology which aims to oust Western Logocentrism and its metaphysics. Derrida's philosophy can be seen as a response to the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. The Czechoslovakian philosopher had sought to discover a foundationalist epistemology based on reason and language. Husserl was concerned to establish philosophy as a science, or, better, a presuppositionless science of sciences, in which the quest is for self evident truths after the footsteps of René Descartes. The "objects" of presuppositionless science, according to Husserl, are phenomena, that is, that which *is* what it appears to be. Derrida would reject this logic of presence, replacing it with "difference", a concept first proposed by the Swiss philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure. Reacting against the "historicist" understanding of language promulgated by philosophers in the nineteenth century where etymology is esteemed as an important approach to linguistics, Saussure proposed a structuralist understanding in which language, like music, is conceived of "synchronically", that is, as a network of interrelated sounds and meanings. According to this view, language is understood as the product of social convention. Language and meaning becomes internal to itself although it is given shape by the universal and objective "structures" inherent in all cultures. This means that language is that self contained system of relations, and the distinction and meaning of a unit of language is the product of "difference".

Post-structuralists, while rejecting their predecessor's appeal to the universal and the objective, nonetheless embrace, in the main, their understanding of language. Derrida picks up the Swiss philosopher's idea of meaning and by a clever and playful twist turns the Sausurrean "difference" to "*différance*". Although the latter term is coined by Derrida himself, its etymological root lies in the French verb *differer* which means both to "differ" and to "defer". "*Différance* sounds exactly like *difference*. But by appending the *ance*- ending, which in French produces verbal nouns, Derrida contracts a new form that means literally both "'differing' and 'deferring'." (Grenz, 1996:143) What Derrida hopes to register here is his absolute rejection of Husserlian phenomenology. Meaning is not found within the Husserlian self-reflective consciousness but produced by the difference in the language chain. *Différance* is a theory which asserts that "whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present." (Derrida, 1972/81:26) Thus, the end of language is purely self-referential: "This interweaving, this textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There is only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces." (Derrida, 1972/81:26) The attack on modernity's "metaphysics of presence" and the concept of the self is also made by appealing to the structure of temporalization, first proposed by Heidegger, except that in Derrida, this is located not in the Heideggerian *Dasien*, but in the intratextual matrix:

Subjectivity – like objectivity – is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*. That is why the *a* in *différance* also recalls the fact that spacing is *temporisation*, detour, delay via which institution, perception, consumption, in a word the relationship to the present, the reference to a present reality, to a *being*, are always deferred. Deferred precisely because of the principle of difference, which means that an element only function and signifies, only takes or gives "meaning" by referring to another past or future element in an economy of traces. (Derrida 1972/81:40)

Influenced by Nietzsche, or, more precisely, by Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche, Derrida applies this to experience in general: "This structural possibility of being severed from its referent or signified (and therefore from communication and its context) seems to me to make of every mark even if oral, a grapheme in general, that is... the nonpresent remaining of a differential mark cut off from its alleged 'production' or origin. And I will extend this law to all 'experience' in general, if it is

granted that there is no experience of *pure* presence, but only chains of differential marks." (1972/82:318) "The absence of a transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of significations infinitely." (Derrida, 1978:280)

Thus the "metaphysics of presence" and with it Western logocentrism is deconstructed by Derrida. Now deconstruction is difficult to define, not least because Derrida has carefully placed many obstacles along the path, insisting that in the end it cannot be defined: it is something which one does. But this does not mean that deconstruction is a technique either. Neither is it a style of literary critique or even a procedure for the interpretation of the text. (Grenz, 1996:148) These attempts to make deconstruction a rarified phenomenon do not detract from the fact that it is in the end a technique, a way of reading and interacting with a text, which is informed by a certain philosophy of language and meaning. In fact, deconstruction is everything which Derrida says that it is not. Be that as it may, the main purpose of deconstruction, namely, the destruction of Western logocentrism, is obvious. Derrida writes: "Deconstruction cannot limit itself or proceed immediately to a neutralization: it must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practice an *overturning* of the classical opposition *and* a general *displacement* of the system... Deconstruction does not consist in passing from one concept to another, but in overturning and displacing a conceptual order, as well as the nonconceptual order with which the conceptual order is articulated." (1972/82:329-30) Writing therefore has no extra-linguistic referent – Derrida here attacks the objectivist and representationalist epistemology of Western philosophy. "Deconstruction is a perpetual reminder that the origin of language lies with writing (the 'Sign of a sign') and not with some assumed immediate experience of the correspondence of thought with object. Not even thought can escape the endless supplementarity of the linguistic system." (Grenz, 1996:150) The metaphysical concept is completely dissolved, and what is left behind is an unending chain of texts which points to an interplay of presence and absence, the presence of traces of a reality now absent, or traces of its former connection with other elements.

There is no such thing as a "metaphysical concept". There is no such thing as a "metaphysical name". The metaphysical is a certain determination or direction taken by a chain. One cannot oppose it to a concept, but to a process of textual labour and another enchaining. (Derrida, 1972/79:6)

Perhaps the most eloquent criticism of deconstructionism comes from the pen of George Steiner, who in his book *Real Presences* (1989) argues convincingly that arts and literature would be reduced to nothing without the transcendental. Is there no truth at all in the claim, Steiner asks, held for centuries, that every serious work of art and literature is an *opus metaphysicum*? Deconstruction claims that there can be "no foundational speech-act, no saying immune from unsaying." (119) Deconstruction is that "uncompromising negation of meaning and of form as these are made the (fictitious) objects of both interpretative recognition and of consensual or 'objective' variations." This rejection of course stems from the abject rejection of metaphysics and the concept of God. "The issue is, quite simply, that of the meaning of meaning as it is re-insured by the postulate of the existence of God. 'In the beginning was the Word'. There was no such beginning, says deconstruction; only the play of sounds and markers amid the mutations of time." (120) Deconstructionism immortalises Gertrude Stein's statement that "there is no there there" in its appeal to "absence". In his criticism of deconstructionism, Steiner points to its inconsistencies, very much like the way in which Bennington criticises Lyotard's theory. The deconstructive discourse, Steiner observes, "is itself rhetorical, referential and altogether generated and governed by normal modes of causality, of logic and sequence." "The deconstructive denial of 'logocentrism' is expounded in wholly logocentric terms." Steiner has eloquently pulled the rug from under the feet of the deconstructionists.

To some degree, symbolic logic has been able to develop formal presentations of so abstract and generalized a type that they can be used to test, to deconstruct other formal languages from, as it were, outside. No such extra-territoriality is available to post-structuralist and deconstructive practitioners. They have invented no new speech, no immaculate conceptualizations. The central dogma, according to which all readings are misreadings and the sign has no underwritten intelligibility, has precisely the same paradoxical, self-denying status as the celebrated *aporia* whereby a Cretan declares all Cretans to be liars. Immured within natural language, deconstructive propositions are self-falsifying. (129)

Equally eloquent is Steiner's attack on deconstructionism's critique of metaphysics, and its removal of the transcendental because of its preoccupation with the immanent and the particular.

We must ask of ourselves and of our children whether secular, in essence positivist, model of understanding and of the experience of meaningful form (the aesthetic) is tenable in the light or, if you will, in the dark of the nihilistic alternative. I want to ask whether a hermeneutics and a reflex of valuation – the encounter with

meaning in the verbal sign, in the painting, in the musical composition, and the assessment of the quality of such meaning in respect of form – can be made intelligible, can be made answerable to the existential facts, if they do not imply, if they do not contain, a postulate of transcendence. (134)

But the seductiveness of the postmodern approach has entrapped those theologians who wish to break free from the grip of modern, post-enlightenment epistemology and ontology and create that which is novel. Several revisionist and deconstructive theologies bearing the postmodern stamp have appeared during the second half of the twentieth century, all of which have taken seriously Nietzsche's critique of the onto-theological tradition of the West. In the late sixties and into the seventies, there appeared the radical Death of God theology of Thomas Altizer with the publication of *The Gospel and Christian Atheism* (1966). Although the initial uproar of his radical proposals have since waned, Altizer continued to pen several more works, all equally radical, during the following decade. Heeding to Nietzsche's posthumous voice Charles Winquist has also attempted to provide a postmodern alternative to traditional theology and metaphysics in his 1986 book *Epiphanies of Darkness: Deconstruction in Theology* and his more recent (1990) article "The Silence of the Real. Theology at the End of the Century." (Winquist, 1990) Our examination of postmodern deconstructive theology will focus on the radical a/theology of Mark C. Taylor whose approach seems to bring the philosophies of Nietzsche and Derrida and the impulses of Lyotard (although he is seldom named in Taylor's writings) to its most extreme conclusion. This statement must be qualified, however, at the very outset, since there can be found in Taylor's proposal a certain reticence to succumb to this extreme, although every aspect of his thinking (or un-thinking) seems to indicate that the final plunge into the sea of nihilism and chaos is inevitable.

Taylor's a/theology is an attempt to overcome the dichotomies and polarities that have resulted in such a great impasse in Western philosophy and theology. Most of the major issues that have arisen in twentieth century philosophy and theology have been defined, according to Taylor, by Hegel and Kierkegaard, whose contradictory approaches can be expressed respectively by the all encompassing "both/and" and the incisive "either/or". In his speculative-specular philosophy Hegel sought to synthesize the "Greek vision and Christian faith to produce a unity that realizes both the death of God and the birth of total self-consciousness." (Taylor, 1990:51) In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel

presents the progression of humanity as a whole as well as individuals from consciousness to self-consciousness, one which is made possible with the coming of absolute knowledge. The Absolute is the negation of antithesis through synthesis, the identity of identity and nonidentity, the union of union and nonunion. "Within the bounds of Hegel's speculative logic, the structure of subjectivity is the identity-within-difference in which the subject becomes *itself* in and through the relation to *its own* other. Nonunion, difference, and otherness are both necessary to the encompassable within the identity of the subject." (52) Kierkegaard is suspicious of Hegel's totalising propensities. His criticism of Hegel's notion of identity is, according to Taylor, devastating. "Kierkegaard's relentless non-systematic critique of the System is a concerted effort to recover the difference and return of the otherness that philosophy and philosophical theology repress." (Taylor, 1991:238) In this way, Kierkegaard "anticipates many of the most important insights of poststructuralism." (1986:14)

Twentieth century theology begins with Barth's emphatic "No" to liberalism, according to Taylor. This "Nein" can be seen as the strenuous effort on the part of the Swiss theologian to reject post-Hegelian philosophies, so influential in liberalism, in which the ontological difference between God and man is ignored if not erased, and to recover what Kierkegaard calls the infinite and qualitative difference between God and man. "Barth's 'No' represents a rejection of every form of theological liberalism and all variations of cultural Protestantism in which divine presence is regarded as immanent in historical, social and cultural processes." (1991:238) The counter to Barth's approach emerged in the form of the death of God theology which appeared in the 1960s. So important is this movement to Taylor that he could say that "modern theology reaches a certain end in the death of God theology" and any postmodern theological reflection must pass through the "fiery brooks" of the death of God. Thomas J.J. Altizer, America's most influential voice for the death of God theology, in making this declaration is really announcing the death of the Barthian God. "Altizer's 'No' to Barth's 'No' is at the same time a 'Yes' to a radical immanence in which all the vestiges of transcendence are erased." (1991:239) What is here revived is the Hegelian notion of immanence: the death of the transcendent God means that transcendent presence has now become fully present in the temporal, and difference and otherness is overcome. Thus in twentieth

century theology, there can be found an accentuation of the polarity of the "both/and" and the "either/or".

Is there be no way out of this impasse? Taylor believes there is, and in his work attempts to articulate a between/beyond of Hegel and Kierkegaard. Taylor speaks about the "space" between the extremes put forward by Hegel and Kierkegaard, a "margin along" or "divine milieu" in which the polarities are overcome but not ignored. This middle way Taylor calls the "neither/nor". Taylor's "margin" seems to resemble Heidegger's "nothing" in that like the German existentialist philosopher, Taylor also proposes that one is able to find fulfillment only in negation and emancipation from those things which bind. In deconstructive fashion, Taylor, who is committed to the philosophies of Nietzsche and Derrida, and who is an heir of modern secularism, identifies and tries to deconstruct four foundational notions found in traditional Western theology: God, self, history and book. Western secularism, according to Taylor, is the cultural endorsement of Nietzsche's declaration in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* that God is dead. This had resulted in the dissolution of the very foundation for the meaning and purpose of life. Consequently the identity of the self is also lost, since with the dissolution of the divine reality, time and history are relativised; the notion of history as a grand narrative is repudiated. This has a further implication in the relationship between words and things, which can no longer be understood in realist or representationalist terms, being themselves subjected to the temporal, the fleeting and the ephemeral. Hence there can be no such thing as a canon of text, no final story. History cannot be told and is not told – a book therefore must have no ending, but must be open, without closure. This deconstruction God, self, history and book has left a vacuum, a void, which Taylor attempts to fill with his a/theology in which God becomes writing, self becomes trace, history becomes erring, and book becomes text. Terence Tilley explains,

In a/theology, strict alterity, difference and opposition do not exist. Writing-tracing-erring-text becomes an intermingling matrix of notions in an eternal interplay. Writing is the divine milieu... Writing, for Taylor, is a way to approach the mystery of the space between, a space created by the deconstruction of Godself-history-book. In this space, the "self" realizes it cannot and "need" not possess its "own" identity... One gives up the race for domination, for self-identity, for self-stability, for self-mastery. In doing so self becomes trace. The trace is not definite or finite or full. It simply accepts the space and lives without certainty or stability or mastery. It is neither master nor slave. (Tilley, 1995:62)

Taylor's interpretation of the death of God is therefore fundamentally different from that of Altizer. The latter embraces Hegelian immanentism, the total presence of the divine in universal humanity which is now divinised: if the "I AM" dies, then the voice of the "I AM" is heard in the voice of the "I am". For Taylor, the death of God implies "the impossibility instead of the realization of total presence." (Taylor, 1990:56) "Instead of leading to the total presence constitutive of the complete realization of both God and humanity, the death of God calls into question the very possibility of fulfilment by forever deferring the realization of presence." (Taylor, 1991:242) Religion, explains Taylor, "is a binding (*ligare*) back (*re*) that is supposed to bind together." If, however, the ending never arrives, if God is dead, and the origin is missing, "then religion binds back to nothing." Religion therefore fails because it returns all to nothing, In the wake of the death of God, religion which binds us to and by nothing, does not heal, but exposes us to wounds that cannot be healed.

The "re" of religion marks a repetition (compulsion) that neither solves nor heals but re-marks the devastating space that is the dead time of the nonapocalyptic disaster. The wake/*Wake* that (interminably) mourns the death of God must find a way to betray the betrayal of God. "And man must understand the sacred sense of this divine infidelity, not by opposing it, but by performing it to himself." The betrayal of God betrays the sacred. Such duplicitous betrayal cannot be represented theologically but must be performed a/theologically. To write the impossibility of theology by writing a/theology in which God is always missing, it is necessary to rethink the death of God by thinking the way one dies. (Taylor, 1990:69)

A/theology marks the end of theology. It is the unsaying or unthinking (deconstruction) of all that traditional onto-theology has said, as well as the saying or thinking of that which traditional theology has failed to say. It seeks to diffuse the impasse which polarised philosophy and theology by pointing to the margin, the in-between. But if theology has reached its end, what then is the task of theological thinking? Taylor explains: "The task of thinking at the end of theology is to think the end otherwise than as the end *of* theology by thinking ending a/theologically." What Taylor attempts here is to bring the Derridean war against Logocentrism into the arena of traditional theology: "After thinking the all, the question that remains is how to think the nothing that theology has left unthought." He goes on to say that "if this unthought nothing is to be thought, it must not be thought ontotheologically. To think nothing non-theologically would be to think an end that is not an end to theology." (Taylor, 1990:49) But, what is

this *sublime* in-between that Taylor speaks about? Does Taylor's apophatism really help us to overcome the tensions of the dichotomies that he has so ably described? Can Taylor really talk about the in-between without also affirming these polarities? What does his unsaying say? Furthermore, can Taylor's *sublime* in-between, his vacuous Neither/Nor, really hold its ground against the pull of nihilism? Taylor himself recognises just how flimsy his "middle way" approach, which smacks of Buddhism, is. He wrote: "It is perhaps naive to believe that a/theological thinking can contribute to our psychological, social and political struggles with difference and otherness. I would hope, however, that this naivete is, in Ricoeur's terms, a 'second naivete', a naivete that has been tempered by reflection and its inevitable failure." (Taylor, 1991:248) Taylor realizes that nihilism is, in a certain sense, unavoidable in the postmodern world, but energetically tries to resist its pull. But does not Taylor's a/theology, with its embrace of the death of God, sound very much like the desperate cry of someone who is already swallowed in the abyssal darkness of nihilism? Taylor's "Neither/Nor" approach, which resembles so much of the rootlessness, placelessness and disjointedness of the postmodern ethos, can be best described by the poignant phrase of Gary Eberle (1994) as the geography of nowhere:

The end of approaching... has always been approaching... approaching from the beginning. Still, it seems closer today than ever before. We are on the edge of disaster, under its threat. That threat is real, and we delude ourselves by trying to deny or repress it. Can the disaster be delayed? Will it be deterred? We cannot be sure. If there is hope, then it lies not in certainty but in uncertainty, not in security but in insecurity, not in foundations but in their faults, not in cures but in wounds – wounds that sometimes are inflicted on and by the Word. In "the twilight of the idols", we linger – linger with the wound that is not precisely ours. That wound might be our hope. Small hope. Fragile hope. Nothing more. *Nothing* more. (Taylor, 1991:248)

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ABSTRACT

The culture that we inhabit is sometimes called "postmodern". This essay explores the various characteristics of the postmodern ethos, especially the postmodern tendency to privilege the particular and marginalise the universal and its impact on theology. Thinkers such as Lyotard and Derrida are examined critically in this article, as is the a/theology of Mark C. Taylor. The essay argues that the insight of Aleksandar Solshenitsyn with which the essay began accurately describes the culture of postmodernism, for even as this culture privileges the particular and eclipses the universal, it displaces God as the centre of reality, and in its decentred existence, anarchy and nihilism reigns.

撮 要

本文旨在探討後現代現象的一些特質對神學的影響，並指出其中最須關注是後現代思潮對個殊性的重視及對普遍性的排拒與質疑。

本文對利歐塔 (J. Lyotard)、德希達 (J. Derrida) 及泰勒 (M.C. Taylor) 的後現代思想或神學加以批判，並認同蘇薛肯尼辛 (A. Solshenitsyn) 的說法，認為後現代思想最終引致虛無主義。