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Future teachers should have . . . some workable philosophy regarding the nature of language.

De-Centering the Center: Postmodernism and Meaning

Scott E. Smith

"In a sense, of course, all philosophizing is a perversion of reality: for, in a sense no philosophic theory makes any difference to practice. It has no working by which we can test it. It is an attempt to organize the confused and contradictory world of common sense, and an attempt which invariably meets with partial failure—and with partial success. It invariably involves cramming both feet into one shoe."

—T.S. Eliot

Appropriate in its perversity, Eliot's image of cramming both feet into a single shoe seems to provide an apt backdrop for any careful consideration of the current theories surrounding postmodernism. As a theoretical discourse, postmodernism continues to enjoy *haute monde* status in education departments across the nation. Given this, one would not be altogether wrong in concluding that, as have other vogue discourses, postmodernism has brought much to bear in the way of variant (and most probably virulent) strands of theory not only in education departments but also, and most importantly, on the students within those departments. One might also make a reasonable and corollary assumption that, though they may not be cognizant of them or able even to refine or articulate them, students within these departments go about the process of adopting as their own certain epistemological and ontological assumptions regarding their chosen disciplines.

Future teachers of composition and language, as will be the focus of this paper, should have, prior to entering the classroom, some workable philosophy (however crude or unsystematic) regarding the nature of language. Either directly or indirectly English teachers will encounter seemingly banal questions the answers to which will actually be the stuff of higher criticism. For example: Does a standardized English exist? If so, does instruction toward student mastery of standard English a reasonable and realizable goal? What relationship, if any, exists between language and truth? Can writing be depended upon as a means of conveying or even possessing

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meaning over time on a consistent basis? Though these questions, all variously treated by postmodern thinkers, seem abstruse and perhaps even of little relevance for high school language teachers busily marking narrative paragraphs for parallelism, they are precisely those questions teachers ponder when going about the business of establishing criteria for acceptable work. It would seem wise, therefore, for all those whose business is education to investigate the degree to which postmodern theories, chewed, swallowed, and digested by education students, eventually make themselves manifest in popular instructional and curricular trends throughout elementary, middle, and secondary schools.

Though postmodernist discourse is arguably so diffuse and syncretic as to be understood as irrelevant by many scholars, there is throughout the postmodernist thinking an assumption that actually collects errant, even bizarre theoretical statements. For example, in an attempt to give shape to the elastic and elusive prolegomena, Patrick Slattery in *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era* defines postmodernism as, "a philosophical movement that seeks to expose the internal contradictions of meta narratives by deconstructing modern notions of truth, language, knowledge and power."² Anyone trying to find from this definition a basis for continued study would have to look to the currently popular postmodern technique of analysis: so-called *deconstruction*. Postmodernist analysis has a tendency to subsume theories across the traditional boundaries of academic disciplines—specific and often esoteric theories from such disparate fields as semiology, ecology, and anthropology. This novel and highly speculative method of analysis is evident throughout the literature. It finds its genesis in, among other sources, the works of semiologist and structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and literary critic and father of deconstructivist criticism Jacques Derrida.

Though a complete analysis is well beyond the scope of this effort, a few generalizations as to the internal arguments of both structural criticism as well as its more aggressively seditious progeny *deconstructive criticism* will prove sufficient in illustrating their relationship to postmodernism. Why deconstructive criticism? What exactly is being deconstructed? Vincent Leitch in *Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction* provides an invaluable description of the what ideas lurk behind the curtain of deconstructionism. What is being deconstructed are no less than the fundamental and largely occidental presuppositions regarding language.

Leitch points out that the traditional understanding of the relationship between spoken language and written is the result of what to a deconstructionist amounts to the "valorization of speech. This valorization of speech is identified, at least within our tradition, as being brought about by the West's Judeo-Christian heritage. For the West, speech has more closely approximated the primary, generative nature of God's spoken *logos*, or the Word. This primacy in part results from Judeo-Christian tradition maintaining that man participates in the likeness of God, though to a lesser extent, through his capacity to create by means of the spoken word. There has also existed a fundamental Judeo-Christian understanding as to causal relationship between the creation of the world and a divine Will made manifest by the Word. In terms of traditional Western understanding, language begat writing. In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates debases the nature of the written figure as a result of its distance in time and space from its origin in the mind.³ Quite simply, it is easier to understand the spoken word as participating in and with or coexisting with its mental origin. Certainly, within the Roman tradition the spoken language was not only granted primacy but also ultimacy: language begat writing which begat oration. Postmodernism bases its assumptions regarding language on structuralist and deconstructive theories of literature that upend this tradition by placing the written figure first. Approaches to language that retain even vestiges of

this western tradition are pejoratively termed by Jacques Denida "logocentric".⁴ As Vincent Leitch states, they "collapse writing into speech."⁵

The postmodern position is cast in full critical relief only when one understands how the elevated status of the written figure is coupled with the idea that not only an arbitrary relationship between the written or spoken *signifier* and certain *signified* phenomena exists, but that there is an inherent inability of both written and spoken *signifiers* to consistently *signify* anything. This notion was first espoused by the structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure who writes, "Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system."⁶ What Saussure argues for is an understanding of language as essentially a study of written figures. However, the deconstructionist and postmodernist analysts exploit Saussure's theory of signs in such a way that it becomes an argument against the very possibility of meaning.

The postmodernist thinker adds to the concept of the inconsistent and arbitrary written figure the notion that language is best understood as existing within competing discourse communities. Each community has its own connotative nuances and lexicon. Such communities are seen as transient and ephemeral. Words constantly adopt new and varied denotations and connotations as they merge with and exit competing communities. Words then can only be understood as existing in a continuous state of relative *not-meaning* or *potential-meaning*.

The notion of *differance* (a French word that combines the words for "difference" and "deferral") as articulated first by the deconstructionist Jacques Derrida, points further to an inherent tendency of words to retain meaning only to the extent that they differ in composition from other words. Derrida's is a notion quite a bit more exploitative than Shakespeare's "A rose by any other name." Derrida's argument tends toward the conclusion that words avail themselves of only relative differences in shape or form. They can deliver themselves of no real *meaning*. Derrida's theory seems to approximate something like the following: What can be said about the sound *sop* or the letters *soap* is not that they mean anything. Rather, this particular grouping of letters *soap* as well as the sound *sop* retain a tenuous signifying status to the extent that they exhibit a difference from, say, *soup* or the sound *sap*. From a postmodern point of view, the various differences in sounds and forms are precisely those that define competing discourse communities.

Returning to the question of postmodernism's effect on teachers of composition, one might again look to Patrick Slattery's book. Referring to it as the "philosophy of modernity," Slattery describes postmodernism as, "an ecological and ecumenical world view beyond the modern obsession with dominance and control; or finally a post-structural movement toward de-centering where there is an absence of anything at the center or any overriding embedded truth at the core, thus necessitating a concentration on the margins and a shift in emphasis to the borders."⁷ Such a statement clearly reveals the degree to which postmodernism has drawn from the fathers of deconstructionism. The deconstructed and emasculated *logos* has led to a postmodern ontology that does not allow for Truth (ontology addressing what can be known as opposed to the epistemological matter of *how one comes to know*); "deconstructing" has led to "de-centering." Leitch's book again proves invaluable in revealing certain epistemological and ontological assumptions regarding the possibility of knowledge that are often not adequately articulated in various explications of postmodern theory.

Leitch posits the existence of what he terms "axiological oppositions." These oppositions have heretofore been fundamental in the West's dominant schools of epistemology:

'voice/writing, (spoken word)/graphie(written word), sound/silence, being/nonbeing, phonetic script/nonphonetic writing, consciousness/Unconscious, originary speech/secondary marks, inside (interiority)/ (exteriorly), thing/sign, reality/image, essence/appearance, signified/signifier, truth/lie presence/absence. . . .'⁸ It is Leitch's point that the West's "logocentric" system has granted primacy to the first member of each pair. To the deconstructive critic and the postmodern critic it seems to be rather the second item of each pair that is privileged. With this, a tradition is uprooted. With Leitch's list of inverted pairings in mind, it can be understood why Slattery places nothing at the center of the postmodern reality and gives emphasis to the margins. It seems that the poet W.B. Yeats proved accurate in predicting that the center would not hold; however, it is not because the center is weak but because it has been "deconstructed."

In what way might one conceive of a process-approach to composition that allows for a world in which silence, appearances, unconsciousness, and lies subvert and transcend sound, essences, consciousness, and truth? Rough drafts being comprised of omissions (silence), redundancies (results of unconsciousness), and sentence fragments (only appearances of sentences) seem to satisfy postmodern criteria. Are they then of any less worth than a final paper? What are teachers to look for in student-produced fiction? Has language been deconstructed enough so as to preclude any possibility for such a phenomenon as the omniscient and reliable narrator? Or, are *omniscient* and *reliable* simply antiquated terms of an obviated system, only to be replaced with *ill-informed* and *unreliable*? If in the postmodern system of inverted axiological oppositions *reality* and *thing* have surrendered to *image* and *sign*, does a student studying symbolism err in moving first from the garden in Richard II and second to Shakespeare's England? Is literary symbolism any longer possible? In other words, far from being a point of departure for further insight, is the scarlet letter an *image* and *sign*, an end in and of itself? Most importantly, are language teachers, especially those in the primary grades, bound to hold students accountable for rules regarding such matters as spelling and punctuation? It seems implicit in postmodern theory that no one discourse community has a monopoly on what should define formal or even standard language. Perhaps this is why fewer young readers and writers are directed by teachers to consider classical or romantic authors and poets as models; the discourse communities of Keats and Pope have long since vanished, and along with them has any desire for *their* language.

Keeping in mind Patrick Slattery's view of postmodernism as a philosophy "deconstructing modern notions of truth," it must be remembered that these so called notions, far from being modern, have their roots in the schools of the ancients. As is commonly the case with novel metaphysical *isms*, postmodernism presumes a relevance based upon insufficient arguments. Many proponents of postmodernism approaches to curricula fail in the way of apologetics by justifying the need for a revised and appropriately postmodern curricula based solely upon the current popularity and almost pervasive influence in some parts of the academy. Education students learning in some methods courses that teachers *can* no longer recognize a formal writing style or that rules regarding usage *can* no longer be emphasized, must ask themselves to what extent postmodernism has successfully refined or broadened the ways language can be understood and used. The fact that the words *can* and *can't* tend to be used over and against *should* and *shouldn't* emphasizes what is allowed for not by a normative pedagogy but by reality itself. Reality from a postmodern perspective has changed, and by definition ontologies have the power to change reality by changing what persons can know. Similarly, then, it seems that perverse ontologies (postmodernism, in the opinion of this writer, being one) can degrade

reality by both deconstructing what can be known and recasting what should be known. As John Gardner in *On Moral Fiction* writes, "With their intuitive philosophies, thinkers like Nietzsche and Kierkegaard overwhelmed such schools as the Oxford idealists, though nowhere in all their writings do they refute or for that matter show that they clearly understood the idealist position on even so basic a matter as whether or not there can be rational goodness."⁹

"The theories are certainly, all of them, implicit in the inexact experience of every day, but once extracted they make the world appear as strange as Bottom in his ass's head."

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