

Common Sense, Moral Accountability and the Intellectual Life

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**Common Sense, Moral Accountability
and the Intellectual Life***

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At its best our age is an age of searchers and discoverers, and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily.

Flannery O'Connor

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“Common sense,” according to Timothy Dwight, the scholar, poet and early president of Yale University (1795-1817), “is the most valuable faculty [...] of man”.¹ Uttered by an academic in the contemporary university, this might well be considered a provocative remark for any of several reasons. Common sense — that sense of things by which we discourse in common — is not, according to some prominent voices in the contemporary university at least, regarded as a valuable faculty in any sense of the term. For American philosopher Richard Rorty, what we

* This article was delivered as the annual (1994) Timothy Dwight Lecture at the University of Pennsylvania, April 13, 1994.

1. T. DWIGHT, *Theology Explained and Defended*, 4 vols., New Haven, S. Converse, 1823, 4 : 55, pp. 260-61.

call “common sense” is “nothing more than a disposition to use the language of our ancestors, to worship the corpses of their metaphors”.²

I. TEXT AND COUNTERTEXT

Professors of literature, like professors of law, have traditionally tended to hold less disparaging views of received language, received story, and common sense, of course. In addition to Nietzsche, Samuel Beckett and Margaret Atwood, let me confess it cheerfully, I still teach Chaucer, Samuel Johnson, Alexander Pope and the Bible, which for English literary tradition remains a foundational text, the ur-source of innumerable plots, characters and allusions. All these, and beside them a cast of thousands, constitute after all, not only the “language of our ancestors”, but their wisdom, their ‘story’, and their own sense of ‘received story’.

A. SPEAKING IN PARABLES

Because my principal subjects of research and teaching are naturally illustrative of the proposition that the most sensible characterizations of reality are often afforded by extended metaphor, typically a story or parable, it is perhaps predictable enough that I am tempted to try to characterize our current academic ambivalence about common sense with a borrowed story :

In the mountainous regions of northern Italy there was a small monastery which overlooked a not much larger sub-alpine village. Every day early in the morning, a monk wound his way down a footpath to say mass in the village church. One cold morning of a late spring, he spied a small bird by the side of the path, shivering with cold and nearly expired. Without hesitation he picked it up, examined it, and then for lack of an alternative put it inside his habit, next to his warm body. By the time he had reached the piazza in front of the church, the little bird had revived enough to be wriggling about rather briskly under his garment, and he realized he could not bring it with him into the church. The bells began to chime. As he stood wondering what to do he noticed a great steaming cow pie, providentially placed there by a dairy cow departing for meadows beyond the village. Gently but firmly he set the bird down into this warm and gelatinous mixture and, with a brief benediction, went into the church. Contrary to what you might think, the bird was revived still further by the warmth of the cow pie — so much so that it began to sing. An old fox, patrolling over the stone wall of the church-yard, heard it, hopped over into the piazza quick as a flash, snapped it out of the cow pie and ate it.

Now there are three points to this story. First, the one who puts you into it is not necessarily your enemy. Second, the one who gets you out is not necessarily your friend. Third, when you find yourself up to your neck in the stuff, it is on the whole the best policy to keep your beak shut.

We are likely to laugh reflexively at this little fiction of convenience. Considered more scrutinously, however, our laughter could prove self-incriminating. For in truth, as a parable for the contemporary university, this narrative is less plausibly a risible allegory for the elementary constraints of academic life than a subversive invitation to accommodate the protracted demise of that life. The invitation to silence as a strategy for survival, stripped of its scatological humor, is in

2. This contrasting statement by Richard Rorty is taken from his *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 21.

fact a counsel of despair. Part of what makes the parable thus evidential for me is the occasion of my first hearing it — an address by a former Rector of my own university to a group of newly appointed and mostly freshly minted Ph.Ds.

B. THE SILENCES OF POSTMODERNISM

My own intention is counsel of quite a contrary sort. All of us know and feel, in the supposed groves of academic freedom, pressures to maintain a code of silence. Whether this silence should be the quiescence of accommodation or the hollow vacancy of abdication is, for the conscientious thinker, at least, a moot point. Many of us who have committed ourselves to the intellectual life to the work of the University imagine that our ultimate accountability is to a higher jury than that composed by our bureaucratic masters, or even our peers. This higher accountability — along with the respect and good will we bear to our colleagues — dictates that we speak up plainly now and then out of such understanding as we have been given — even where what we have to say challenges rather than expresses a consensus. But in today's university we are sometimes made to wonder if there are practicable ways to represent unfashionable perspectives vigorously, rigorously and faithfully — to sustain or even open up enquiry in ethically crucial areas where some would shut it down.

It is appropriate that reflection on this question should include an assessment of current academic working conditions. Prominent among those conditions is an escalation of constraint against affirmation of the original tradition of the university itself — which from its European foundations in the 13th century to the inauguration of almost all the major universities in North America, is a Christian intellectual tradition.³ For evidence for the founding tradition, as well as the current constraint, we need look no further than the original seals and mottos of most of our major institutions. These mottos have, in many cases, been reduced from a full and meaningful biblical phrase (e.g. the University of Ottawa's *Deus scientiarum dominus est*) to perhaps a single abstract word (e.g., *Veritas, Lux*) or else deleted altogether from campus advertisements and letterheads over the last several years. The reason typically given for this minor — but nonetheless significant — dissociation from history and foundations is a commitment to “pluralism”.

A more pervasive dissociation has been effected on North American university campuses by the overt rhetoric of what has come to be called “political correctness”. A slightly less charged term to cover the ethos of constraint or repression of its own intellectual tradition in the contemporary university is that first

3. Among the best standard histories of the foundation and substantial tradition of the university are: H. RASHDALL, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages* (1986), re-edited in 3 vols. by F.M. Powicke and A.B. Emden, London, Oxford University Press, 1936; 1969; C.H. HASKINS, *The Rise of the Universities*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1923; G.M. MARSDEN, *The Soul of the University*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994; M. GAUVREAU, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queens University Press, 1991. For an account of the modern shift away from Christian foundations see G.M. MARSDEN and B. LONGFIELD, eds., *The Secularization of the Academy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992.

given currency in American academic argot by Leslie Fiedler — “post-modern”.⁴ In the view of another and currently more fashionable culture theorist, Jean-François Lyotard, we are to understand that post-modernity refers to a shift away from epistemology, particularly such enlightenment theories of knowledge as imply a philosophy of history — or world-view — as a means of legitimating that knowledge. In this sense — and with its wider implications for signal cultural narrative of the more purely literary sort — Lyotard’s simplest definition of post-modern is “incredulity toward metanarratives”⁵; in addition to apparent “post-Christian” (or post-Jewish) presuppositions, this incredulity entails a loss of confidence in any modern theory of progress. In Anthony Giddens’ encapsulation: “The condition of post-modernity is distinguished by an evaporating of the “grand narrative” — the overarching “story line” by means of which we are placed in history as beings having a definite past and a predictable future”.⁶

In this sense, however, it is surely the case that, as Lyotard, Giddens and Charles Taylor, among others, have argued, the intellectual cultivation of post-modernism is effectively a phase of acceleration for what we have long called “modernism,” that is, an accumulation of modernism’s full momentum, a time in which “the consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalized and universalized than before”.⁷ One of these consequences is the politicization of educational culture: from Thomas Dewey’s notion that the purpose of public education was socialization, its goal the “final pooled intelligence” of the mass mind, many educators have come to construe the task of the university as a political institution of a prevalent sociology of knowledge, which some now feel requires political coercion rather than the exchange of free debate to be effected. One sees this development in authoritarian pronouncements like that of Barbara Johnson, Professor of English at Harvard, who says that “professors should have less freedom of expres-

4. It may also be the most misleading. Fiedler’s preoccupation with the subversion of traditional canons and the instituting of texts of heretofore marginalized culture (e.g., African-American, native Indian, homosexual) nevertheless signals a prominent political attribute of postmodernist agendas. See his “In the Beginning Was the Word: *Logos or Mythos?*” in *No. 1 in Thunder: Essays on Myth and Literature*, Boston, Beacon, 1960, pp. 295-308; and *What Was Literature? Class Culture and Mass Society*, New York, Simon and Shuster, 1982.

5. J.F. LYOTARD, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and M. Massumi, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. xxiv. Cf. his penetrating observation in the appended essay, “What is Postmodernism?” that “Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities” (p. 77).

6. A. GIDDENS, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990, p. 2. Noting that the decline of Marxist political regimes has accelerated the tendency in postmodern theorizing to disregard — or wish to disregard — any overarching worldview whatsoever, Giddens amplifies his definition by reference to the actual disarray in postmodern discourses themselves:

What does post-modernity ordinarily refer to? Apart from the general sense of living through a period of marked disparity from the past, the term usually means one or more of the following: that we have discovered that nothing can be known with any certainty, since all pre-existing “foundations” of epistemology have been shown to be unreliable; that “history” is devoid of teleology and consequently no version of “progress” can plausibly be defended; and that a new social and political agenda has come into being with the increasing prominence of ecological concerns and perhaps of new social movements generally.

7. *Id.*, p. 3; J.F. LYOTARD, *op. cit.*, note 5, p. 79.

sion than writers and artists, because professors are supposed to be creating a better community".⁸ More disturbingly, it has taken the form of bureaucratic edicts, such as the Ontario government's "Framework Regarding Prevention of Harassment and Discrimination in Ontario Universities" (1993), with its "zero tolerance" speech code providing sanctions against any remark or expressed opinion, advertent or inadvertent, which could be construed as creating for anyone a "negative environment". We discover that the modernist impulse, which begins in the pluralist promise of greater personal liberty, when pressed to its full consequences, can suddenly seem to revoke that original promise. In social terms at least, this is the real meaning of "postmodern".

C. CONTEXTUALIZING VOICES

At my own university, I teach a graduate seminar on the "Intellectual Foundations of Literary Modernism". The last time I taught this course, as a strategy for provoking thought about the meaning of both modernism and "post-modernism", I asked the graduate students, on the first meeting, to identify characteristics of modernity which set it off in their minds as distinctive from previous epochs. With little hesitation they nominated two factors: the birth of self-consciousness and the rejection of authority. Then, with very little prodding, they added a third: the problematizing of reference in language. I encouraged them to sustain and contextualize these choices in classic modernist texts; and they did so as any of us might, by reference to Nietzsche, Rousseau, Kant, Blake, Freud, Sartre, and Saussure. At the outset of the second meeting I reminded them of the previous week's discussion, then asked their permission to read over against it a much older text, Genesis 3: 1-13. It can be instructive as well as amusing to think of the serpent in Eden as the first deconstructionist. ("Hath God said...?"). In this narrative too is the perennial temptation to "play God" — and it reminds us that Sartre's "I create myself" mimes our first parents' rejection of their Creator's authority. Nor did humanity need to wait for Freud to learn that the ensuing discovery of our nakedness implies a form of self-consciousness as consequence which leads us tormentedly to evasive rationalization and repression. For my seminar students, these reflections prepared the way nicely for an examination of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* and Goethe's *Faust* — because, of course, the conditions of human motive highlighted in the Genesis narrative are prior to and the constituent condition of these "modern" acts of writing as well. That is to say, our modernist and post-modernist texts, considered dialectically in the light of the tradition which they reject, often prove somewhat less than novel in respect of that tradition, their own claims notwithstanding.

8. Quoted by Robert DETLEFSEN, "White Like Me", *New Republic*, April 10, 1989, p. 18. That this constraint on professional free speech is directed against freedom of conscience and of religion has been pointed out before. Recently George Marsden, formerly Professor of History at Duke and now at Notre Dame, has gone so far as to suggest that truth in advertising laws might require American colleges and universities to add a specific disclaimer to their typical anti-discrimination assurances in university calendars and handbooks, saying after the sentences encouraging "diversity of perspectives", "except of course, religious perspectives; we do, of course, discriminate on the basis of religion" ("Religious Professors Are the Last Taboo", *Wall Street Journal*, Wed. Dec. 22, 1993, p. A-10; see also "Scholar Calls Colleges Biased Against Religion", by Peter STEINFELS, *New York Times*, Fri. Nov. 26, 1993, p. A-22).

To apply these thoughts to our initial predicament : we might for example, at least tentatively take up those three traits of the modernist *religio* identified by my graduate students as though, modernist or not, they were nonetheless *relatable* to their progenitive discussion in both Jewish and Christian tradition. When one proceeds in this fashion, one finds of course — sometimes through the disapproving observations of students and colleagues — that certain suppositions of these confessional traditions of belief are now in unambiguous confrontation with the precepts which tend to govern discourse in the post-modern university. And that the confrontation is no longer really susceptible of being nuanced away. There is a telling and trenchant irony in this impasse : the conflict in which we find ourselves seems at one level after all but a replay of persistent confrontations as old as the earliest analysis of the human condition. But for those of us still willing to acknowledge a debt to the oldest traditions of the university, this can prove in fact a helpful irony. That is to say, the conflict is already one with which each of us personally and, as Christians are wont to say, the body of Christ collectively has had considerable experience, and in terms of which we have developed an unparalleled resource of textual tradition. As a result of that tradition and the revelation upon which it is based as reflection and commentary, at least as much as the “post-modern” agnostic or atheist, we are to some degree self-conscious about “where we are coming from”. This has the modest virtue of clarifying what is at stake for us in the current debate.

As intellectuals within a religious tradition we are reminded, to begin with, that what accountable Christian faith may not abandon without losing coherence includes most surely (1) the fact of *authority outside the self*, even the institutional ‘self’. This sphere includes for us not only the authority of revelation but also the authority of tradition (history, the past). (2) Nor can we accede to fashionable versions of the theory that there can be no *viable relation of language to truth* or extra-mental reality. We resist this not merely for the sake of maintaining a congruent doctrine of Scripture and tradition, but also as a way of acknowledging the fact of our communication with other persons (including credal post-modernists), upon which depends any meaningfulness of the notion of self as agent. (3) Finally we think we have a basis for thinking that in practical terms the self-consciousness of persons in relation is not finally divorceable from some representation of the condition of *accountability*, here on several levels to something outside the self.⁹

The Christian who lives within the tradition of his or her own texts is as aware as any post-structuralist theorist that all three of these matters overlap and interpenetrate — the very nature of language, text and culture guarantee this. But the Christian has also come to recognize that what sustains any integrity in our perception of this relation is acknowledgment of the limit of the self — by itself — to comprehend (in the radical sense of that word) the integration. Each node of our self-understanding is, by definition, a corporate phenomenon : it betrays the interplay of other selves. And pragmatically, each aspect of the integration requires finally also to be authorized from a point of reference more stable than the instant of exchange — grounded in a confirmable, traditional sense of transcendent Other.

9. A helpful early critique of the legacy of Kant’s transcendental ego for Western intellectual tradition is the Gifford lectures (for 1953-54) by John Macmurray, published in two volumes as *The Self as Agent*, London, Faber and Faber, 1957 and *Persons in Relation*, London, Faber and Faber, 1961.

This pragmatic is our strongest and most reliably tested community hypothesis. It contrasts sharply with the post-modernist's version of Kant's transcendental ego, whose "intellect does not derive its laws (*a priori*) from nature but perscribes them *to* nature" (Prol., trans. C.J. Friedrich, 91) and which, like the self-reflexive Cartesian *cogito* which preceded it, tilts toward an autonomous selfhood (*auto/nomos*) we are likely to find problematic from an ethical point of view — not to say self-deceived. Unlike Sartre, most of us do not imagine that in any of these spheres the self can meaningfully be said to "create" itself.

II. TEXTS AND TRADITION

In order to sense the depth of the intrinsic Christian objection to a typical postmodernist credo, we need only review briefly some well-known summary assertions of post-modernist university discourse which purpose to exclude a Christian view of the self and its intellectual work-to-do.

A. AUTHORITY OF THE PAST

First, on the matter of the authority of the past — the relevance of history or tradition to present understanding : — It is evident that the "loss of grand narrative" (Lyotard) offers an attractive means of justifying exemption from one critical sphere of accountability. Rationalizations — often overstated — for the virtues of this "loss" or jetisoning of a common story are often, therefore, "theoretical" masks for simpler and more candid declarations such as Sartre's "I create myself" or William Blake's famous response to tradition : "I must create my own system or be enslaved by that of another man".

Refusing one's obligation to the past can take a variety of forms of hubristic ingratitude. If I may draw on a classic text from English literature of the Renaissance : one of the humorous preludes to the damnation of Marlowe's professor Dr. Faustus occurs at the theatrical diversion put on for his benefit by Lucifer and Mephistopheles, a dance of the Seven Deadly Sins — to Faustus the laughably outworn form of an archaic ethical analysis. The first dancer is Pride, whose brazen self-declaration to the besotted Faustus is : "I disdain to own any parents". This of course quite precisely mirrors the professor's own hubris. Yet if we jump forward to 19th century America, we must acknowledge an evident sea change concerning hubris. What Marlowe regards as a self-deluding vice sufficient to lead his Wittenberg professor to perdition, 'Professor' Ralph Waldo Emerson, following Blake, makes a virtue of "Self-Reliance" in his famous essay of that name : "History is an impertinence and an injury", he declares *inter alia*, "if it be anything more than a cheerful apologue or parable of my being and becoming".¹⁰ A more acute self-consciousness about this stance is found in the famous quip by Oscar Wilde : "The one duty we have to history is to rewrite it".¹¹ It is the ironic

10. R.W. EMERSON, "Self-Reliance" in *Collected Essays*, New York, Hurst and Co., 1892, pp. 7-48. For Emerson, perhaps, the paradigm American romantic incarnation of Kant's transcendental ego, "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of our own mind". Accordingly, "No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature. Good and bad are but names very readily transferable to that or this; the only right is what is after my constitution; the only wrong what is against it".

11. *The Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, ed. G.F. Maine, London, 1954, p. 962.

Wilde who has really grasped the nettle firmly. History, like myth, tends, when rejected, to require replacement by something more unequivocally and unambiguously *self-justifying*. Or “therapeutic”. So the expedient proposal is to rewrite history so as to accommodate these frankly self-centering purposes.

To take just one example : the sustained connection in North American Marxist versions of post-modern theory between the otherwise patently contradictory pursuits of a radically subjective hermeneutics and a radically determinist socialist politics becomes more comprehensible in the light of the rejection by the autonomous ego of parenting, mentoring, and tradition.¹² Richard Rorty, who can seem, on occasion, a derivative example of the odd contradiction, is obviously echoing self-deifying voices from Faustus and Blake to Sartre when he urges that instead of attempting to understand ourselves as part of an intellectual and social tradition, we should follow Nietzsche’s example and insistently define the world from the ego out. Such a world is likely to prove a lonely place. If we need palliation, he says, we should “seek consolation, at the moment of death, not in having transcended the animal condition, but in being that peculiar sort of dying animal who, by describing himself in his own terms, had created himself.” Rorty makes it hard not to think here of the song made famous by America’s most notorious hoodlum singer, Frank Sinatra : “I did it my way” — the theme song of hell, I think Peter Kreeft calls it.¹³

More pitiable banalities of confused self-idolatry live on in the North American academy. At Duke University, for example, the self-advertised “cutting edge” of post-modern literary criticism, several of the most prominent Marxist, post-structuralist, and feminist academics have abandoned both literature and criticism for the writing of autobiography. These “leading national figures” in English literary theory — Frank Lentricchia, Alice Kaplan, Marianna Torgovnick, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Jane Tompkins (wife of ex-chairman of the English department, Stanley Fish) among them — by their newly acquired disdain for explanatory discourse and their turn to direct literary self-creation, merely carry the logic of their romantic theorizing and, as Tompkins calls it, their “trajectory of personal development” to its inevitably embarrassing conclusion. Fish himself, meanwhile, has edged himself out of the (non) community he largely created, apparently under ungrateful social pressure to do so, to take full-time shelter in Duke’s Faculty of Law.¹⁴

12. This impulse is clearly discernable in S.E. FISH, *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech and it’s a Good Thing Too*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994; first essayed as an article with the same title in P. BERMAN, ed., *Debating Political Correctness*, New York, Laurel, 1992, p. 233.

13. See R. RORTY, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, *op. cit.*, note 2, p. 27. Roger Lundin, in a helpful and penetrating recent study, comments usefully on this and other of Rorty’s central formulations (*The Culture of Interpretation: A Christian Encounter with Postmodern Critical Theory*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1993, pp. 224-5). Kreeft’s remark is found in his *Back to Virtue*, San Francisco, Ignatius, 1992, p. 100. “My Way”, actually written by Ottawa native Paul Anka, recently earned for its composer the order of the Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres, perhaps in part because it was in fact Anka’s adaptation of a French song, “Comme d’Habitue”, by Claude François. If repetition is any index to its general significance for Western culture (since it was written in 1968 it has been sung in 600 versions, with more than 300 million records sold) then this song would seem to be a kind of anthem for our time.

14. For a recent review see A. BEGLEY, “The I’s have it: Duke’s ‘Mor’ Critics Expose Themselves”, (1994) 4.3 *Lingua Franca* 54-59.

Confessionally Christian or not, I think we can all see something of what is going on here *spiritually*. To be sure, mere diagnostic observation does not help much with what we see. A question which haunts Christian and other traditional religious critics within the system is: have we ourselves anything useful to say about these at once self-glorifying and obviously also despairing ambitions? The question we tend more often to actually ask aloud is more tentative: how might one even begin to suggest, in such an anti-realist environment, that the current emperors seem disturbingly underdressed?

As is well known, during our now nearly two millenia of social history, Christians have on more than one occasion had to deal with intemperately attired emperors. Not all of this was pleasant for us. Naturally enough, various strategies for enquiry into the delicate matter of imperial undress have, from time to time, been offered, not all of them commensurably delicate. But a line of question recurs which, if not perfectly discrete, has at least the advantage of an honest desire for mutual understanding. Let me take the risk.

I refer to the matter of motives. All culturally accountable persons, one hopes, will want to think about the motives which may lie behind the Nietzschean articulations which tend to recur in much postmodern discourse. Why should any wielder of potentially tyrannous power want to insist on being *auto-nomos* (a law unto the self) “self-created”? What are the uses of such a myth? And how should such a one escape evidence that might give the lie to this myth of self? Protect his alibi? One of the oldest strategies of all (*cf.* Gen. 4) — it is hardly a novelty — is to exclude contrary or implicating witnesses. And that, it seems, is what the “rewriters” of history evidently wish to do, as much as did those who were burners of books.

In general, Christian intellectuals ponder such strategies with concern. If Paul Ricoeur is right that the paradigm shift in modernist historiography involves reluctant abandonment of the enlightenment theory of progress to an age of unstable ambiguity, and that the crisis of ambiguity in turn is bound to resolve itself either by finding alternative grounds for hope or falling into despair, then perhaps what we are living with now is confused irresolutions of both impulses.¹⁵ Might it be, as Anthony Giddens has suggested, that “loss of a belief in ‘progress’ [...] is one of the factors that underlies the dissolution of ‘narratives’ of history”?¹⁶ Shamed by the painful embarrassment of the old Enlightenment and Darwinian assurances about the triumph of rational progress, yet unable to admit that this bankruptcy is open to succinct and yet psychologically plausible analysis from within the Christian tradition upon whose rejection the Enlightenment project was constructed, is it possible that some of our contemporaries are drawn to “post-humanist”, “post-liberal”, “post-modernist” strategies out of a felt need for what the media handlers of politicians like to call “damage control”?

If this — or some version of it — were an actual motivation for certain kinds of ego-preoccupied yet consensus-demanding post-modern theories, how might non-postmodernists purposefully, yet compassionately and self-critically, query theoretical narrowness? How might more of us, together, enter into a discourse of sober, historical and rational enquiry concerning the increasingly evident

15. P. RICOEUR, *History and Truth*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1974.

16. A. GIDDENS, *op. cit.*, note 6, p. 10.

divorce of moral accountability from educated and professional life — a kind of intellectual's examination of conscience?

One way to begin, I would suggest, might be to lay aside exclusionary rhetoric and to attempt a more self-transcending, less narcissistic examination of our contemporary use of language and logic.

B. LANGUAGE AND TRUTHFULNESS

As we know, for the post-modernist, language is no longer to be used according to its conventional expectations of reference. For Rorty, for example, the notion of truth external to the self to which language attempts correspondence is purely chimerical, the faded vestige of a world view in which people could believe, as Roger Lundin trenchantly puts it, "in something so demeaning as a Creator God".¹⁷ In practice, say Rorty and post-modernists generally, it is as Kant suggested, only more so: "everything can be changed by talking in new terms" — by our language *we* constitute our world, as well as our "self". Our saying makes it so. Where conventional associations with language make this awkward for us, we simply redefine key terms: a key recognition of radical modernism is the discovery that "anything could be made to look bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed".¹⁸

In America, Madison Avenue and the political spin-doctors have been well ahead of the philosophers in developing this theory as cultural practice. (It was the culture of Madison Avenue, we may remember, which popularized the materialist myth of the "self-made man".) Philosopher Rorty identifies post-modernism with the egocentric "romanticism" of figures like Blake and Rousseau, as well he might. But the mediation of this romanticism is by a quite specific and less esoteric post-romantic discourse. When Rorty says that the essential post-modern thesis is that "what is most important for human life is not what propositions we believe but what vocabulary we use", he quickly observes that philosophers like Nietzsche and William James have been instrumental in developing this thesis by teaching us to give up "the notion of truth as a correspondence to reality". Henceforth, instead of saying that the function of language is to "bring hidden secrets to light, they said that new ways of speaking could *help us get what we want*".¹⁹ The essentially consumerist phrase is, I think, a kind of giveaway. Here, an admirer of common sense may justifiably feel, is 'adult' language more or less rationalizing the screeching ego-centrism of a spoiled only child — perhaps the new "everyman" for North American culture (*cf.* Bart Simpson, or Calvin of "Calvin and Hobbes"). For those who read books to small children, statements like Rorty's offer inescapably a reminiscence of Humpty Dumpty. Some of you may remember the passage:

"[...] There's glory for you!"

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.

17. R. LUNDIN, *The Culture...*, *op. cit.*, note 13, esp. chs. 4, 8.

18. R. RORTY, *Contingency...*, *op. cit.*, note 13, pp. 5, 7.

19. R. RORTY, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 142, 150, (Italics are mine).

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't — till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'" Alice objected.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all."²⁰

In such a self-referential linguistic environment, to cite Nietzsche, truths are passed off as "illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are" ("On Truth and Lies"). When we permit linguistic meaning to be reduced to an affect of power, or mastery, there remains little possibility of truthful exchange. Lyotard claims that the academic question is no longer "Is it true" but rather, "What use is it?" or "How much is it worth?" (Madison Avenue again. In the marketplace of ideas, option price can be the real bottom line, as anyone who has followed the career of certain luminous contemporary professors will appreciate.) And so Relativism reigns, often as the consort of Opportunism. It may thus be for a complex of not very high-minded reasons that, as Jaroslav Pelikan puts it succinctly, in some quarters of the academy, relativism "especially relativism about first principles" has been elevated "to the status of a first principle (about which it is not permitted to be a relativist)".²¹ Contemporary demands for "pluralism" are often just another form of this new first principle, and just as often a bed-mate of Opportunism.

Thinking about these issues raises discomfitting moral dilemmas for the academic who believes herself to be responsible to pursue more than raw professional success.²² A pertinent task for contemporary scholarship in the social sciences and humanities — one, it must be admitted, not yet constructively enough accomplished — may thus be identification and analysis of the *motivation* for wishing relativism *a priori* to reign, for the banishing of truth questions. Perhaps more of us need to find ways to ask Lyotard's question — "What use is it?" — but from a more self-transcending, ethically prompted perspective.

To be sure, we may find that we do not necessarily have to have read George Orwell or Aldous Huxley yesterday to come up with some pretty disturbing initial answers. Yet surely we must probe further. What do some of the perspectives of communication theory, legal theory, translation theory, or even the normal commerce of daily life in community have to say about the anti-realist temper of post-

20. From ch. 6 ("Humpty Dumpty") of Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, ed. Martin Gardner, *The Annotated Alice*, New York: Bramhall, 1960, pp. 268-269.

21. J. PELIKAN, *The Idea of the University: A Re-examination*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 29.

22. According to David Bromwich, *Politics by Other Means: the Limits of Institutional Radicalism*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, "The new academic professionalism shows that [universities] at this level are just one more casualty of an ethic of market rationalization that controls our society as never before". Yet properly, he observes, "Professional development really has no more claim upon us than real-estate development. [...] The truth is that with much refinement and convenience, professionalization has brought much damage everywhere. *Everywhere*: in the medical and legal professions, too; in every discipline the creation of which requires the creation of a new laity. What it most has destroyed [...] is our common sense of public life" (p. 111).

modern language in its flight from epistemology to “hermeneutics” (Rorty)? As *ethos*, is post-modernism merely taking evasive action here, or is it possibly striking out in anger at exposure of a misplaced idolatry of the self? Behind the extremism, then, are there particular grounds for our compassionate understanding? Can we hear in the post-modernist’s angry words and self-referential logic a *cri de cœur* explicable in much more straightforward spiritual terms?

Those of us who believe that “faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God” have of course a central stake in these questions. Our communities have been formed and maintained — across the centuries and in widely divergent cultures — through a lively awareness both of the glory and the limitations of speech. The asymptotic imperfections of our languages have been shaped under a process of persistent self-correction by reference to the Word of God being read and lived out daily as “conversation” in the community of the faithful from generation to generation. Within limits that we ascribe to every fallen human convention, we who remain conscious of our debt to previous generations have indeed come to exercise a provisional trust in the language which has been handed down to us. For example, even though we also put it to the test, daily, we nonetheless trust language to expose to us with sufficient practical clarity both the generality and the specificity of our own sinful rationalizations, the persistence of old Adam’s self-justifying will to relativize or hide from the truth.

C. CONVERSATION AND COMMUNITY

It is no accident that the earliest narratives in Genesis, including those of the ‘fall’ of Adam and Eve, or of the calamitous judgment which fragmented the language of the builders of the Tower of Babel, have everything to do with a universal human sense of primal breakdown in communion, community, and communication.²³ This deep frustration and nostalgia for a lost homeland of dependable meaning are the ineradicable conditions of our psychic existence. The instability of our efforts to speak to common purpose, to achieve a common sense, has typically, in the stories of our ancestors, been seen as the important condition which all redemptive efforts of good will are seeking to overcome. But in their collected wisdom these stories do not suggest that the way to community is the way of an enforced conformity, the pressing of individual voices into one or another chant of groupspeak. Rather, they suggest the human necessity of complementarity, the recognition of diverse gifts, voices and understandings which *together* come to fill out and make up a richer, fuller, more commodious understanding. That is to say, common sense is, in these narratives, the result of a corporate effort in which each member plays his or her distinctive but necessary part; no tyranny of “correctness” imposed from above, be it by autocrat or theocrat, can do more than compound our sense of alienation. Truth may be one in the eyes of God, say the wisdom writers of

23. The classic narrative history is by A. BORST, *Der Turmbau von Babel: Geschichte der Meinungen über Ursprung und Vielfalt der Sprachen und Völker*, 3 vols, Stuttgart, 1957-63, but for an acute exploration of the implications for language and contemporary intellectual culture, see G. STEINER, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1975. From the recognition that there is “no civilization but has its version of Babel, its mythology of the primal scattering of languages” (p. 57) Steiner goes on to argue against the obsessive preoccupation in linguistics with a search for mathematical and logical tools for a model of meta-language into which all given languages can be made to fit.

our civilization, but, humanly speaking, it takes many sets of eyes just to see that it must therefore be something larger than “truth for me” — or “truth for the emperor” either, for that matter.

Though it may involve a charitable disposition, the Western university tradition of “giving the other his due”, allowing alternative points of view to be heard and debated, is not on this reading necessarily an expression of altruism. David Bromwich, in his recent book *Politics by Other Means: Higher Education and Group Thinking*, observes that in the liberal humane traditions of Western intellectual culture we have habitually agreed to toleration as a communal virtue, not so much out of kindness to the claims of others with whom we may not agree, but from an “irreducible respect” for ourselves. Historically, part of the university’s tacit credo has been the idea that “a possible truth taken out of the world is a truth taken away from the world, and a stimulus to vivid thought removed for every single person in it”.²⁴

Membership in the *universitas* has always involved a reciprocity of obligations and freedoms. From the 13th century Paris charters in which students and faculty covenanted to uphold each other in mutual respect and *caritas* down to university charters of the recent past such as the mid-20th century biblical motto *Multitudo sapientiam sanitas orbis* (University of Victoria), membership in the university had involved the obligation to seek out, consider, and conserve all “possible truths”. Contemporary academics ought not lightly, I submit, whether out of self-respect or respect for the views of others, accede to recent efforts to deny this persistent primary purpose of the University. Rather, they should seek to assure its continuance as the indispensable condition of our ongoing conversation.

For example, there ought to be ample room for scholars with a frankly confessional worldview to enter the postmodernity debate with a note of “productive dissonance”. It might not be entirely beside the point, for example, for our contemporaries to be reminded periodically that the limitation of language as sign, its partiality and hence limit, does not logically make it useless as a means to shared understanding and practical *consensus gentium* about the world.²⁵ Though language is both revelatory and distorting at the same time, no responsible intellect ought to despair just because it denies us full Nietzschean mastery, and lapse into silence. Or psychobabble of the perpetually offended, which is the moral equivalent.

And there are other productive questions that might be posed more vigorously by a diversity of academics with a residual respect for common sense. Might it be that the problem of truth which so bedevils our contemporaries has been confounded also through refusal to probe *ethically* the apparent unreliability of our instruments for assessing it? What if it could be shown in practical terms, for example, that reliable constitution of objective otherness is frustrated by the nature of subjectivity almost precisely to the degree to which that subjectivity is anarchically exercised? (That is, what if the biblical doctrine of *sin* actually proved cen-

24. D. BROMWICH, *op. cit.*, note 22, p. 162.

25. The 1991 Presidential Forum of the Modern Language Association includes a series of reflective acknowledgments by Mario Valdes, Haydn White and Linda Hutcheon that indeed (*mirabile dictu*) literature itself could not function nor interpretative communities survive if “truth-telling” as Hutcheon calls it, were not a recognizable and to some extent a decipherable activity. See *Profession 92*, ed. Phyllis Franklin, New York, Modern Language Association of America, 1992.

trally relevant to our pursuit of these questions?) Is it accidental that the breakdown of language seems most acute in sociological circumstances which are radically fragmentary, and almost complete where effectively anarchic — yet least “problematic” among coherent communities (traditions) of discourse? Why is the fact of more or less divergent perception among more or less autonomous perceivers any argument against the possibility that there might nonetheless exist a perspective in which these limitations of variability are substantially overcome, and of which some steadying reflection might more probably be garnered among communities or traditions of speakers who combine their efforts to approach the goal of shareable truths? To rephrase, using the old metaphors: if there is undeniably a *Zeitgeist of Babel*²⁶ there is also a *Zeitgeist of Pentecost*. And surely it equally deserves our study and reflection.

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor has made it his own project to try to arrive at a temperate critique of modernism in which it is possible to reckon with and beware some of its tyrannical impulses while preserving what he takes to be modernism’s most cherishable legacy, the notion of personal authenticity (*Sources of the Modern Self*). In his Massey Lectures for 1991 he calls for recovery of a now “degraded” romantic ideal. To achieve this, he argues:

[...] What we need is neither root-and-branch condemnation nor uncritical praise; and not a carefully balanced trade-off. What we need is a work of retrieval, through which this ideal can help us restore our practice.

To go along with this, you have to believe three things, all controversial: (1) that authenticity is a valid ideal; (2) that you can argue and reason about ideals and about the conformity of practices to these ideals; (3) that these arguments can make a difference.²⁷

With Taylor’s three controversial “beliefs”, I think many thoughtful (and common-sensical) culture critics will want to accord in some measure. These would seem to be among the minimal hypotheses of academic “faith”, in effect, without which free academic discourse would cease to exist. Yet even here we need to remain tentative and vigilantly self-critical. Taylor’s second and third points of creed can have their value only to the degree that his first point, “authenticity”, does not become simply another post-romantic warrant for selfishness. It is equally clear that to remain accountable our notion of integrity must resist being diminished into a reactive Sartrean refusal of the “inauthenticity” of “conventional” social relationships. That too is narcissism.

An academic whose perspective is still shaped in some additional measure by centuries-old Christian traditions of discourse in the university may still have useful doubts about the sufficiency — at least for the enhancement of moral accountability in intellectual life — of putting all our efforts into attempting to retrieve a suspect ideal of romanticism. No more than a degraded version of Luther’s *hier stehe ich*, it might be argued, or post-Kantian humanism or neo-Cartesian *cogito* is an “integrity” which effectively insists on the self as its own sufficient judge and jury very likely to advance our quest for communal discourse or to achieve a viable community of understanding — at least without tempting the ghost of Nietzsche once again to arise in its ugliest form.

26. I. HOESTEREY, *Zeitgeist in Babel: the Post-modernist Controversy*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991.

27. C. TAYLOR, *The Malaise of Modernity*, Concord, Ontario, Anansi, 1991, p. 23.

Yet it is also evident that we cannot advance communal discourse under the thumb of any insistent, let alone legally imposed, conformism. One virtue of thoughtful and mutually respectful language, language dedicated to the ongoing nurture of a common sense, is that it allows all of us still to have a part in the conversation, to hear the other, to help each other come to a better understanding of the world, even the partial world of academia. For this collective good, we need to hear distinct articulate voices in debate, clarifying speech in respectful pursuit of that all too uncommon good, good sense. Choruses of sophisticated or solipsistic rhetorical self-indulgence are not much to the purpose. But contemporary counsels (or codes) of silence, which is to say, of despair, are as plainly counter-indicative to faith in the future of the university.