

**THE TWENTIETH CENTURY INHERITANCE:  
MYTHS, METAPHORS AND A METAHISTORICAL  
IMAGINATION**

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In considering the dialogue between Religion, Literature and the Arts, we need to remind ourselves that ever since the philosophy of consciousness took the linguistic turn, whole schools of theory within the humanities have been dominated by rhetoric about language, about what language is as sign, as symbol and as sacrament, and what language can, or cannot convey about being and knowing.

Jürgen Habermas reminds us that this rhetoric began to evolve in the early nineteenth century,<sup>1</sup> and its enterprise can be described as 'postmetaphysical' thinking. Since then the humanities have become increasingly devoted to pitting the imagination against language, against society, against science and against religion. And yes, we hear about the longing for 'spirituality', but that is a longing for something other than the Western scientific, religious and metaphysical tradition.

This longing for a new spirituality is intensely anti-intellectual, and the rhetoric that cries out for it is primarily conducted at the expense of what metaphysics and enlightenment are understood to be. 'Metaphysics' and 'enlightenment' have become words that are interchangeable with Western 'religion'. To give three examples, that come, ironically, from within the Church:

1. At the first RLA Conference in 1994 I heard a paper given by an artist. He began by saying he was non-theoretical and non-academic. He was simply trying to express himself, to mediate truth as he saw it. Then he went on to declare that the purpose of his art was to 'overcome the dualism of mind and body which has dominated the Western imagination since the Enlightenment'. Non-theoretical indeed!

2. A few weeks earlier I had made a guided retreat. It was guided by a laywoman who said she hoped the retreat would be challenging. After spending a few minutes negotiating her humility and her lack of intellectual prowess, she launched into a diatribe. She told us quite clearly and emphatically that *the* problem facing Western Christians was how to heal the damage caused by the mind-body split created by Cartesian

epistemology. Those were her own humble and non-intellectual words, and I thought they laid a lot upon the retreatants.

3. Last week I got a flier from Eremos which advertised another of their workshops. This workshop was similar to most Eremos offerings. The flier read HEALING THE MIND/BODY SPLIT and it asked two rhetorical questions: The first, 'Why do we see the body and spirit as two rather than one?' and the second, 'Why is this a struggle in our individual lives and in the culture? [sic]'. It was announced that these questions would be explored, through lecture and performance, by two 'body theologians' from the West Coast of the United States.

These people – the artist, the retreat conductor and the 'body theologians' – think they are on to something important and new, but they are not. They are merely flagellating the Enlightenment by tapping into a Postmetaphysical discourse that is now two hundred years old. It is a discourse that has run through Romanticism, Modernity and Postmodernity, and is now disappearing into the New Age movement. This highlights the problem facing those who want to explore the relationship between Religion, Literature and the Arts in the next century. For whether we are creating or interpreting, we cannot simply mouth tired rhetoric. Neither can we ignore the sciences and remain walled up in a little cul-de-sac within the humanities.

The problem is that the varieties of Postmetaphysical thinking have been good at describing the imaginary problems of the individual and society, as if the description is a sufficient end in itself. Yet in practical terms the description does not help if the problem is not imaginary. To give but one example: Michel Foucault suggests that society is a system which is inscribed, and so realities such as psychiatric illness occur only because they are socially determined. Therefore psychiatric hospitals are filled with patients for no other reason than society has described madness and prescribed institutional control. Metaphysics and the Enlightenment are blamed for all those psychiatric illnesses which Foucault suggests are socially determined. Apparently, as illnesses they have nothing to do with genetics, biology or chemistry, and healing occurs when the imaginary problem is addressed 'holistically' rather than 'dualistically'. Propositions do not come any more gratuitous than this, and the example of Foucault and psychiatric illness demonstrates just how much some parts of the humanities have become divorced from a real world that is not imaginary.

The proposition that metaphysics and the Enlightenment can be blamed for the imaginary dualism of mind and body, and consequently for all illness and institution, is both illiterate and illogical unless it can be demonstrated and substantiated. And yet the glibness which creates this scapegoat, which places being and reality wholly within the construct of human imagination, language and society, is a glibness which is at the very centre of a great deal of current theory and practice. In some circles the theorist who is trained in arts, linguistics and literature has become the twentieth-century shaman and prophet, struggling to heal the Western imagination which has been metaphorically damaged by metaphysics and the Enlightenment. Of course that is perfectly alright until one needs a colostomy or a by-pass, then one moves on from therapy, and art, and goes to a real doctor.

This realm of Postmetaphysical thinking is the overarching discourse in which Romanticism, Modernity and Postmodernity subsist. While the religious theorist understands these discourses as theological, the secular theorist appropriates the same discourses as anti-religious in a general sense that intends to erase both Judaism and Christianity as religions. The secular mind has not been able to grasp the fact that Western religion is not reducible to a narrow definition of metaphysics.

For when Postmetaphysical thinking began to encourage psychological introspection, and began to proclaim the death of God and questioning all other external or metaphysical constructs, it was advancing a theological speculation. This is such an obvious fact that it seems hard to believe that the secular mind, however perceptive or intelligent, has overlooked or dismissed it in the effort to demonstrate that the religious personality must be either naive or dis-integrated. To the secular Western mind religion is the aetiology of illness. Religion is a psychological problem. Sadly, many 'religious' people agree.

The Postmetaphysical interrogation of reason and enlightenment, the interrogation of metaphysics, has focussed upon language as a deep (but increasingly unreliable) structure of myth and metaphor. In such a theoretical scheme language is still, and always will be, a horizon that needs to be transcended and overcome. So here Modernity and Postmodernity, the inspiration of so much literature, music and art, have not been able to separate being from language.

So whatever the serious twentieth-century artist and writer wants to

say about being and knowing is always, in some way, a comment about language or silence. The crisis of the Western imagination is supposed to be, not only a crisis of language, but a crisis caused by language. Of course the proposition of language-as-horizon may well be absolute and true – we dare not try to argue against that – but the more extravagant cosmological, paradigmatic and psychoanalytical claims levelled against language are becoming less and less grounded in that real world which exists outside of interpretive theory. And such a real world does exist, for when we discover a lump we do not theorise about the need for paradigm shift, we go to the doctor and see what the lump is. And we hope it can be treated.

Still, the proposition of language-as-horizon continues to be widely held within the humanities, as it has been ever since the early Moderns began interrogating being and language. The idea continues to inform a great deal of creative practice and interpretive theory within a tradition that is still telling us evil is imaginatively located within the myths and metaphors of Western language. Postmetaphysical wisdom tells us that the metaphysical and logocentric imagination of the Western mind is obliterating and annihilating because it is always attempting to reconcile an imaginary separation of signifier and signified. You see, it's all to do with the Greeks, with Plato and Aristotle, who created psychic disunity, the separation and fragmentation of personality. Dualism is ascribed to Athens, described as Greek mythology, inscribed within Greek language. Disease, or dis-ease, is produced by the civilisation that imagines time as linear, and has a language with subjects and objects, and definite and indefinite articles. Evil is encoded in the sentence: The cat sat on the mat.

It remains to be seen just how long the philosophy of consciousness can keep on taking this linguistic turn without losing direction. Ever since Heidegger uttered the dictum 'the metaphorical exists only within the metaphysical', the new rhetoricians have been treating the idea as a radically given truth. In *The Rule of Metaphor*<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur elaborates upon the meaning of Heidegger's dictum:

This saying suggests that the trans-gression of meta-phor and that of meta-physics are but one and the same transfer. Several things are implied here: first, that the ontology implicit in the entire rhetorical tradition is that of Western 'metaphysics' of the Platonic or neo-Platonic type, where the soul is transported from the visible world to the invisible world; second that meta-phorical means transfer from the proper sense to the figurative sense; finally, that both transfers constitute one and the same *Übertragung*.<sup>3</sup>

This sounded so important, and so convincing, when I was a seminarian, but now I wonder where to begin grounding the proposition. What does it really mean?

The interrogations of Western metaphysics and language, the scapegoating of Athens, the equating of Christianity with the Greek mind, the perpetual blame laid at the feet of Enlightenment, these have gone about as far as they can go without becoming incredible. This is because, quite simply, a civilisation cannot be intrinsically annihilating, and the human person cannot be divided, simply because of reason, or language, simply because 'the cat sat on the mat'.

In a recent volume of conference proceedings entitled *Speculations after Freud*,<sup>4</sup> it was unsettling to note that, while it was a conference on psychoanalysis, most papers published were delivered by university professors of philosophy, linguistics, literature and language. Only one paper was delivered by a psychologist, and he was a Jungian, not a medico. Apparently the conference did not attract professors from most of the humanities, or from theology, or medicine, or *any* of the sciences. This absence is telling, for it suggests that psychoanalysis (like literary theory) has become a kind of cul-de-sac that fewer and fewer intelligent people want to turn to, perhaps for good reason.

Judging from the case studies presented, those academics who are trained in philosophy and linguistics are also psychoanalysing human subjects. As twentieth-century shamans and prophets they are using a Postmetaphysical methodology in order to reintegrate the human personality that is supposed to have been disintegrated, in one way or another by metaphysics and the Enlightenment. They each treat psychological illness as something characteristic of the Modern Western world, an illness that has its aetiology in Western thinking, Western language and Western religion, all condemned as 'logocentric'.

As if crying out against this introspection (even though he ascribes to the mythology behind it), the influential Jungian analyst James Hillman has called for an end to analysis.<sup>5</sup> He himself has given up analytical practice upon realising that after a hundred years of therapy the world is getting worse. For Hillman the problem is that Western individuals have become 'superconscious patients and analysts, very aware and very subtle interiorised individuals, and very unconscious citizens'.<sup>5</sup> In this context

analysis and therapy (even art therapy) cannot help because 'the patient cannot, definitely not, by definition not, become citizen so long as the model of the psyche which therapeutic analysis serves remains fixed where it is'.<sup>6</sup>

For Hillman the real illness is in society not the individual, and so his cure involves recapturing a World Soul which has been killed off by the Enlightenment, and by Christianity. According to Hillman this killing

was articulated by... Descartes, who called it *res extensa*. Out there, as well as everything in this room including our bodies, is just dead matter. Descartes, if not the 1500 years of Christianity before him, killed off the world, turning it into a soulless mass, a littered field. Descartes and the Christians invented litter and pollution, and shopping, too... So long as we regard the world as external to therapy and the individual as the only place of consciousness, we may be practicing with the tools of Freud, but what we practice is the theory of Descartes. And the soul can't get out of analysis until it can get out of Cartesianism and, allow me to add, Christianity.<sup>7</sup>

There is a sinister aspect to Hillman's polemic that will be lost upon those religious artists and creators who have been busily using Jungianism to justify their holistic art-and-dance therapies. It is hard not to glean from Hillman's rhetoric that psychoanalysis will remain devoted forever to the erasure of metaphysics and Christianity, from the consciousness of the individual, and beyond that, from the Western *polis*. For Hillman, by definition one cannot be a good Christian, and a good citizen, and a whole person, as he clearly believes the three categories are mutually exclusive.

If, for Hillman, the issue is a political one (and here I would agree with him, the issue is *intensely* political) then it becomes necessary for Christians to be wary of his battle cry and consider just how he proposes to overcome Christianity in the Western *polis* and replace it with his own superior and more integrated system of belief. How does he intend to recapture the World Soul without violating some basic, hard won and cherished human rights, without subverting the principles of freedom and democracy that come to us from the same Enlightenment which is supposed to be the source of all evil?

What does all of this mean for the inter-disciplinary dialogue between Religion, Literature and the Arts?

It means that as an inter-disciplinary dialogue it needs to be aware of the essentially political nature of interpretation. For the most part contemporary theory has been conducted as the expense of science, and of Western religion in general, and of Christianity in particular. This is a

political issue which ought to be addressed. While a lot of Postmetaphysical theory wants to appear open-minded, a lot of it has become a closed system, and the time has come to question the narrower aspects of its logic.

We can acknowledge this without lapsing into a reactionary arch-conservatism, because there really is quite a lot at stake. The challenge which confronts Religion, Literature and the Arts is a hermeneutical one. It is the challenge of creatively dealing with those inevitable prejudices that are a part of being human. It is the challenge to not be over confident about one's own broad-mindedness whilst always presuming upon the narrow-mindedness of the other. It is the challenge of being truly creative, not merely repeating the clichés of the age, or fighting solipsism with solipsism, or piling reification upon reification. It is the challenge of widening horizons, of keeping open the circle of dialogue between the creator, the interpreter and the text.

Of course we can, and should, understand the meaning of the text and its textuality, in a variety of ways. In hermeneutics there is no totalised meaning and the Hermeneutical Circle ought to be ever widening. Being sensitive to this is paramount, as Religion, Literature and the Arts projects itself into the future, whilst never forgetting the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: there is nothing new under the sun. Everything that has, is, or will be said, by artist, writer and interpreter, has already been said. If this is true, then a lot of art and literature can be regarded as theology simply because it stands in a greater tradition that works and reworks what has already been said, according to the signs of the times. Those signs from different times inform a creative tradition that continues on – like Western religion – in spite of second-rate theory and psychoanalysis. The time has come to discard some of the clichés, shibboleths and solipsisms that surround contemporary theory, so that we can, as creators and interpreters, move on.

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#### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> J. Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (London: MIT Press, 1992), p. 29.
- <sup>2</sup> P. Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1986).
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 281.
- <sup>4</sup> S. Shamdasani, ed., *Speculations after Freud* (London: Routledge, 1994).
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 27-40.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.