



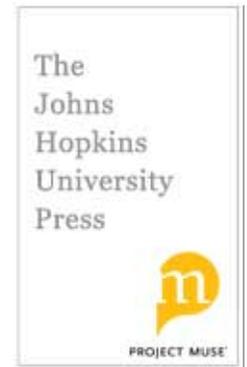
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*Beginning with the Word: Modern Literature and the Question
of Belief* by Roger Lundin (review)

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Beginning with the Word: Modern Literature and the Question of Belief. By Roger Lundin. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014. ISBN 0-801-02726-8. Pp x + 272. \$24.99.

I am asked on a fairly regular basis whether I think postmodernism is good for the church. My answer is always a confident “yes and no.” Yes, because postmodernism has helped to break us out of the modernist box (or structure); no, because it inevitably leaves us stranded in a relativistic, doctrine-less world without certainties or absolutes.

At the root of modernism (or structuralism) is the desire to erect a rigorous, scientific system that will account for all the data we experience. The Darwinian structure reduces all things to the unguided forces of natural selection. The Marxian structure reduces all things to the means and modes of economic production, out of which rise politics, religion, culture, and consciousness itself. The Freudian structure reduces all things to dark subconscious urges; it is the sublimation of these urges, and not the I AM of the Bible that represents the true origin of our psyche.

Alas, the modernist mania for structure has not left the church unaffected. In fundamentalism (with its commitment to reading the Bible strictly literally, often as a scientific textbook), dispensationalism (with its precise historical charts that confidently include a complex itinerary for the future), and hyper-Calvinism (with its rigidly systematic theology that borders on divine determinism), we encounter a desire to squeeze Christianity into a rational, logical system that leaves little room, or role, for emotion and intuition and that downplays the narrative, poetic, and mythic elements of the Bible.

In reaction to modernism, postmodernism (or poststructuralism) has questioned the ability of monolithic structures to account for reality. Rejecting the one-to-one correspondence between a word (signifier) and the meaning of that word (signified) upon which rests not only scientific discourse but the authority of scripture and the integrity of the creeds and dogmas of the church, deconstructionists have set the signifier free from systems that would strip it of its personal, cultural, and metaphorical resonances. For deconstructionists like Derrida all such systems, whether sacred or secular, are guilty of logocentrism.

Although Roger Lundin does not make use of the word logocentrism in his well-researched and lucidly written book, *Beginning with the Word: Modern Literature and the Question of Belief*, he does argue effectively for a literature centered on the Logos (Word). Rather than speak in terms of logocentrism, he defends the existence and value of the Christian metanarrative, something which postmodernist have been equally eager to deconstruct. To be more precise, Lundin explores the relationship *between* words and stories and establishes both in the Incarnation.

Lundin, Arthur F. Holmes Professor of Faith and Learning at Wheaton College, begins his search for the Word with Juliet's heartfelt assertion that Romeo's name is no part of himself. Juliet, writes Lundin, "sounds like a dutiful graduate student wending her way through the labyrinthine paths of contemporary theories of language and interpretation. To her, a name is an arbitrary sign. It may point to a real person or an actual state of affairs, but it should never be accepted as a sufficient substitute for the real thing" (15). For Lundin, Juliet's rebellion against the essentialistic power of names has affinities with William of Ockham's attempt to ground "natural law solely on the arbitrary, unobliged will of God" (15). According to the nominalism of Ockham, words are not names pointing back to eternal realities but arbitrary signs pointing to particular, individual concepts.

With the help of such critics as Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, and Erich Auerbach, Lundin draws a line from Ockham's nominalism, which *was* guided by God, even if God's will was obscure to human understanding, to the naturalistic linguistic structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure. Just as man, according to Darwin, is a product of biological forces working within a closed system, so "the total system of language," what Saussure called *langue*, is a "historically generated social product that makes possible every individual act of speech we write or utter" (49). Truth ceases to be something we discover in an open, enchanted world and becomes something made (or generated or evolved) by the *langue*.

In Saussure, we find the culmination of a slow shift from words as icons that mirror and embody present realities to signs that point to absent, insubstantial things. As such, *langue* does not provide a stairway to metaphysical truths that transcend Darwin's closed system, but functions "solely [as] an instrument of adaptation and desire" (47). Now, Lundin freely admits that the technological advances that have enhanced all our lives owe a debt to the disenchantment of the world and of language, but we as conscious rational beings endowed with purpose and filled with longing have been left impoverished. We can find no meaning in the systems of Saussure and Marx, yet if we abandon them for poststructuralism, we are left equally bereft of meaning.

I may seem to be suggesting that *Beginning with the Word* is a purely theoretical book; in fact, Lundin enlivens, concretizes, and, well, incarnates his analysis through close readings of *The Sound and the Fury*, *The Four Quartets*, *King Lear*, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the essays of Emerson, and the poetry of Czeslaw Milosz and Emily Dickinson. Rather than speak in general terms about the disease caused by living in a world that has lost its metanarrative—its controlling, overarching story of creation, fall, redemption, and reconciliation—Lundin takes us into the troubled minds of the Compson brothers (Benjy, Quentin, and Jason) who collectively narrate *The Sound and the Fury*.

Faulkner's novel allows us to perceive the world through the eyes of a profoundly autistic man (Benjy) who cannot filter or organize the sensations that flood over him, a tormented, overly-self-conscious man (Quentin) trapped in his

own obsessions with the meaningless ticking away of time, and an angry, indignant man (Jason) who thinks he sees the world with clarity but is unable to make use of the time given to him. In all three cases, there has been a postmodern breakdown between signifier and signified. Whereas Benjy is unable “to discern any difference between word and thing,” Quentin “cannot conceive of the two as being related in any way” (118). For the former, all signifiers carry a detached fullness of meaning that makes all words meaningless; for the latter, there is no way to find a path from signifier back to signified.

But this is not the only insight Lundin culls from *The Sound and the Fury*. In the mental and perceptual suffering of the Compson brothers, he detects two dangers latent in both modernity and postmodernity. In the Bible and in Greek tragedy, but not in Faulkner, “there is a distinct connection between our ethical liabilities and our epistemological limitations” (35). That is to say, the blindness of Oedipus and Samson are tied to a classical understanding of hubris (pride) and a biblical understanding of sin. “We in the modern world,” Lundin explains, “have simply swapped out the ethical categories and replaced them with psychological, chemical, and biological ones. ... [For Faulkner] our interpretive limitations have to do with the fact of our finitude rather than the reality of our sin” (35). Our modern world can perhaps offer Benjy some therapy, but it cannot offer him redemption, nor can it offer him a truth beyond the *langue*.

As for Quentin and Jason’s struggles with time, they highlight what happens to a civilization that abandons *kairos* (Greek for climactic time) with *chronos* (Greek for chronological time). “The world as a finely calibrated, heartless mechanism,” argues Lundin after Frank Kermode, “is ruled by *chronos*, which measures the endless succession of moments that flow past us with each tick and tock of the clock. ... *Chronos* time has no place for stories of divine love or human salvation, for those are airy fancies spun with words, not hard facts grounded on the rock of reality” (137). In a disenchanting, Darwinian world where words operate within a closed system stripped of metaphysical reference points, time does not go anywhere; it just goes on and on.

Just as Lundin looks to Faulkner’s novel to diagnose this problem, so he looks to other works of literature and to the biblical narrative as unpacked by Karl Barth to find solutions. Ultimately, if we are to escape from the dual prison house of naturalism and the *langue*, we must return to a Christian vision that is at once creedal and narrative. We need a vigorous understanding of the Trinity to free us from the fatalism of an impersonal universe, of the Incarnation to champion the ability of Meaning to take on human form, and of the Atonement and Resurrection to reveal an active, adventurous God who humbles himself and enters the human drama. And we need as well a biblical signification system in which Old Testament figures and events, by serving as types of New Testament fulfillments, join together space and time into a coherent and purposeful whole.

Beginning with the Word is a fine book, rich with insights and suggestions. But there is one aspect of it I found troubling and counterproductive. Both the Bible translation Lundin chooses (the NRSV) and his own prose style adhere rigidly to the rules of gender-neutral usage, rules that proscribe using “man” or “mankind” to designate the human race. Though this choice puts Lundin on par with most of modern academia, it flies in the face of his much-needed anti-gnostic, anti-nominalist call to treat words as names/icons, or at least pictures, of greater truths.

According to the Bible, “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them ‘man’” (Gen. 5:1-2; NIV 1984). In Hebrew, that last word is “adam.” From the beginning, God refers to the human race by the name of the first man, Adam. Although, separately, we are man and woman, collectively, we are man (adam). It is not humanity, but man (adam), who takes the journey from creation to fall to redemption to reconciliation, and it is the Second Man or Last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45-49) who makes that journey possible.

How can the Christian academy hope to reclaim the naming powers of language if it cannot reclaim the name God gave us at the beginning? How can it tell again the story of man if it is only allowed to refer to an amorphous, androgynous, ultimately Darwinian humankind?

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God of Rescue: John Berryman and Christianity. By Tom Rogers. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011. 978-3-03910-748-3. Pp. 423. \$77.95.

At the close of John Berryman’s life, he had a self-affirmed conversion experience which shaped the themes of his final two poetry collections—*Delusions, etc. of John Berryman* (1972) and *Love & Fame* (revised 1972). This experience, Berryman recalls in a 1972 *Paris Review* interview with Peter Stitt, brought him from the brink of a despair that had haunted him much of his life. As is well-known, this despair manifested in Berryman’s near life-long struggle with alcoholism and chemical dependency; appropriately then, his conversion experience took place while in treatment for this addiction. Encountering an overwhelmingly frustrating experience—not being able to deliver a lecture he had promised his students and felt compelled to deliver, Berryman identified the solution to this impossible situation as “almighty relief,” delivered by “God who had come to his aid” through the vehicle of a counselor at the hospital (Rogers 357).