

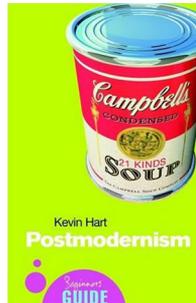
○ REVIEW OF KEVIN HART'S *POSTMODERNISM: A BEGINNER'S GUIDE*

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Peter Miscall reviews Kevin Hart's *Postmodernism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: One World, 2004).



The book is one in a series of beginner's guides published by One World Press. In an initial note Hart comments that it 'is an introduction to postmodernism for people who know little or nothing about it. Special interest is taken in the question of how religion stands in the postmodern world and how postmodernism stands before religion' (ix).

The table of contents has a brief overview of each of the seven chapters including the main terms, themes, problems and the authors discussed in each. Hart includes a select bibliography for each chapter. And, fitting a work on postmodernism, there is a list of websites for general topics and for particular authors.

He acknowledges that 'people do not agree about what postmodernism is, where to go to see its main sights, or even if one can distinguish its central features from others that are less significant' (1). There are no generally accepted lists of authors, specific works and topics, yet there are many available introductions to postmodernism. Hart opens and closes his work with the literary device of guides (docents) offering tours of postmodernism as though going through an art museum and with people on the tour disputing the guide on many issues and writers. This is a fine way of announcing the diversity at the heart of any treatment of the postmodern, diversity of both approach and content. There is no one way of describing or defining postmodernism because there is no one thing that is postmodernism. The diversity of topic is introduced in my first citation from Hart in which he parallels postmodernism with the postmodern world. This dual (or triple or more) focus will surface at other points in the book. Are we dealing with an intellectual, philosophical movement or with our contemporary world in all its manifestations?

His second chapter, 'The Loss of Origin', eschews offering any one viewpoint or restricted number of viewpoints to capture the essence of postmodernism and instead Hart discusses three common theories in postmodern writings: anti-essentialism, anti-realism and anti-foundationalism. The last occupies the lion's share of the chapter and the very term 'anti-foundationalism' undermines any attempt 'to capture the essence of' any thing. Essence, origin, foundation, presence, absolute and unconditioned ground of reality are some of the major words and concepts opposed

by the leading thinkers introduced by Hart through his guides: Lyotard, Lacan, Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault. They all argue in quite varied ways – varied amongst themselves as a group and often within an individual’s own work – against the idea of, or better the dream of, certain and final knowledge, of arriving at the one true way of understanding some one thing.

Hart recognises the inherent limit, the paradox, of trying to understand a group, a movement, a trend – the limit already apparent in the question of what to call postmodernism – that announces and details limits inherent to all human knowledge and intellectual endeavour. De Man catches the aporia in his assertion that Nietzsche says, in a mode of truth, that there is no truth. Then, in a move that Hart repeats throughout his work, he turns to American analytic philosophers such as Rorty, Sellars, Quine and Davidson to introduce their anti-foundational thought to show that postmodernism is not confined to a limited number of writers, mostly European. Hart distinguishes postmodernism from postmodernity, roughly life in our times, but not in any hard and fast manner. To live in the early 21st century is to be postmodern regardless of what philosophical, political, religious or such views one espouses.

The third chapter probes the questions of experience (again the double focus): Does postmodernism offer new understandings of experience? Is there postmodern experience in the sense of new experiences? Hart’s discussion is wide-ranging in terms of time and number of writers and again he strays from the expected canon of postmodern writers turning to Maurice Blanchot and his forerunner Walter Benjamin. Blanchot is concerned, among many things, with representation and images and their impact on culture, including religion. His work is central to Hart’s presentation of the fragmentary, the Bible and religion.

In the West, the Bible is the Book of books, a supreme work as the Holy of holies is the most sacred site. It is a major symbol of unity and totality – The Good Book – extending from creation to the end of time. In the phrase, book of books, we can also focus on the last term, the plural books, and point to the multiplicity of writings that have come together over time to form both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Historical criticism, the ‘bad guy’ for so many postmodernists, drew attention to this diversity and severely undermined, and continues to undermine, traditional views of biblical unity and totality. Yet most historical critical scholars have tried to reassert such unity both through history and in some cases theology and through the dominance of the historical critical method. Yet even that method was already a group of methods that didn’t always neatly cohere and since the 1960s a massive variety of ways of studying and reading the Bible have flourished. The very different *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (1987) and *The Postmodern Bible* (1995) exhibit this variety.

Hart displays a postmodern bent in his presentation by quickly moving beyond this diversity of content and method to discuss figures at the margins of academic biblical studies: Bloom, Blanchot and Derrida. Bloom, with his trope of the uncanny J, who was a woman, and Blanchot with his concern for speech and ethics, are an unlikely pair in a discussion of the Bible but unlikelyness and marginality are key marks of postmodernism. Blanchot’s ethical focus involves Levinas, a major 20th century philosopher, ethicist and biblical reader. At several points Hart notes that postmodern thinkers tend to privilege the ethical (behaviour and action) over the religious (specific belief and dogma).

He closes his short chapter on the postmodern Bible with a summary of Derrida’s discussion of several biblical texts, including the Tower of Babel, the *Akedah* (Genesis 22), Matthew 5-6

and Revelation. Hart has pointed to the incredible richness and variety of the Bible and to the equally incredible range of issues, reading modes and such that can be brought to bear on the biblical text, but even in a beginner's guide I think that Hart owes his readers more. The more could be further development of the topics he deals with or the introduction of yet other readings of biblical narrative and poetry.

In his last two chapters Hart looks at postmodern religion and at the philosophical-theological debate over *The Gift*. Religion in postmodern times spans a large number of spectrums, not just the familiar and easy conservative-liberal, East-West and such. Indeed a mark of postmodernity is the failure of such dualistic contrasts to effectively describe our world. Hart focuses on post-modern religion, most often a Christian undertaking, which is 'an open set of attempts to rethink the faith by reference to those figures associated, rightly or wrongly, with postmodernism' (111). He considers many figures but devotes most space to Derrida's attempt to establish a 'religion without religion, namely a faith that can be developed without reference to *religious* transcendence' (123; original italics).

For Derrida the line between ethics and religion blurs and he stands with, and in debt to, a long line of thinkers including Barth, Kierkegaard, Luther and Meister Eckhart. (Hart could have cast his beginner's guide around debt, an intriguing notion for many postmodern writers.) Derrida's 'religious' thought shares much with negative theology. I note that Hart's tracing postmodernism's roots far into the past fits with Foucault's (a poststructuralist) practice of archaeology: historical investigations reveal contingent 'origins' since there's always someone or something preceding whatever we may term 'the first.' To return to Hart's earlier focus: postmodernism accepts and even celebrates – in the sense of Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* – this lack of historical origin and foundation.

Hart closes with the debate between Jean-Luc Marion (a Roman Catholic philosopher-theologian) and John Milbank (an Anglo-Catholic philosopher-theologian) covering much contemporary terrain and focusing on *le don*, the gift, another notion with ancient roots reworked by postmodern thinkers. Can a gift be truly given without some expectation of return, if only a Thank You? Marion tends toward the pure gift, without reciprocal recognition or return, and Milbank toward actual gifts. He does not want to philosophise actual gifts out of existence. Milbank represents an Anglo-Catholic movement, Radical Orthodoxy, a reaction to the strains of postmodern theology that empty religious belief of content. Hart respects the work of Milbank but regards radical orthodoxy as a bore (146), probably the most critical comment in his book.

Hart leaves us by returning to a brief debate between his guides and those guided, quickly replaying the theme of the diversity of postmodernism and the contemporary scene. He adds yet a few more names and movements to the pot and notes that another tour starts in a half-hour. Despite my quibbles about what I think Hart should have done, I think that he has admirably achieved his opening goal:

When you have finished reading the book, make a photocopy of the bibliography and then give the book to a friend. If these chapters have any value, it will be in leading you to read works by the people whose ideas I introduce and sometimes parry (ix).

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