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0521657083 - Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology
Graham Ward
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Introduction

In the Lent term, when damp winds blew in across Cambridge from the North Sea, Professor Nicholas Lash would conduct his eight-week course in the Faculty of Divinity on analogy. And in as far as any action has a definitive origin, then this book took fire and spread from the flow of molten ideas that kept each student in those classes fanning the air for breath. Why is language so important for Christian theology? Why is Christian theology forced to examine the way it speaks, writes and represents? Why must Christian theology pursue the question of, the grounds for, the character of analogy? It is from questions like these and others inchoate that this book arose.

Its argument might have started in many places, in varied times. I might have chosen to begin with the fine awareness of a correspondence between the incarnate Word and the Gospel witness in Mark and in John.¹ Another possibility for a starting point presents itself with Augustine's sophisticated understanding of the relation between *res* (or what is independent of ourselves), *signum* (or the means we use to represent what is there) and desire (the economy of love and delight).² A *point de départ* might have been located in the skein of potential reference which Aquinas discerns between certain creaturely *modi signifi-*

¹ I have examined this perspective in an essay 'Christology and Mimesis in Mark's Gospel', *Literature and Theology*, 8.1 (1994).

² See here R. A. Markus's pioneering 'Saint Augustine on Signs', *Phronesis*, 2 (1957); 'Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine's *De Doctrina*', by Rowan Williams and 'Augustine on Language', by Andrew Louth in *Literature and Theology*, 3.2 (1989); and chapter 2 of Caroline Harrison's *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

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candi (like 'good' and 'wise') and their divine *res significata*.³ Or I might have wandered through the tortured labyrinths of those seventeenth-century divines who struggled to find an interpretative legitimation for Scripture by equating literalism with the voice of God.⁴ In fact, there are a plethora of points from which a study into the association between theology and language might have been launched. The choosing of one's beginning is, then, to some extent pragmatic. I chose to start with a reading of Karl Barth's explication of the relationship between the Word and words in *Church Dogmatics* (II.1, chapter 5). And my reasons for doing so might be distinguished as philosophical, theological and historical.

Philosophically, Barth's work was executed within the context of a major philosophical reorientation towards the problem of language. George Steiner describes the 'profound crisis of confidence in language brought on by the ruin of classic humanist values after 1914'.⁵ But the crisis of and in language or, more precisely, representation had been gathering pace for many decades. The rise of empirical science, the 'discovery' of verifiable laws of nature, created a dominant belief in the early eighteenth century in the rationally determined stability of Nature. Those Shakespearean doubts about the inviolability of natural law voiced by Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* had been exorcised by the work of Newton, Hooke and Boyle. Alexander Pope could confidently reinstate the great chain of being and proclaim 'Unerring Nature, still divinely bright,/One clear, unchanged, and universal light' (*Essay on Criticism*, 1711). But in the post-Kantian universe any correspondences between a word and an object 'out there' were increasingly viewed as a projection of our own transcendental reasoning. Words were histori-

³ Extensive work has been done in this field by: Henri Bouillard, *The Knowledge of God* (London, 1969); Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Roger White, 'Notes on Analogical Predication and Speaking about God', *The Philosophical Frontiers of Christian Theology*, eds. Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); David Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1986); and Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986).

⁴ See my article 'To be a Pilgrim: John Bunyan and the Language of Scripture', *Literature and Theology*, 4.1 (1990).

⁵ *Extra-Territorial* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 136.

cally, culturally and even psychologically contingent. And language, which was believed to picture transparently the natural order, gradually became more opaque and problematical. If, earlier, words had been considered by some as arbitrary and conventional constructions the truth of the world, Nature, had arbitrated. Nature had been the touchstone for ‘the facts of the case’. But now, in the post-Kantian universe, for words unhinged from any natural correspondence with reality there was no means of arbitration – for our models of Nature too were understood as historically and culturally conditioned. There was no access to things in themselves. All we have, to use Wittgenstein’s word, is a *Weltbeschreibung*, a description of the world.

Hence the crisis of representation, which George Steiner alludes to, was twofold. First, it was a crisis concerning the *what* of representation – what was the ‘natural and objective reality to which language referred?’ And secondly, it was a crisis concerning the *how* of representation – how could language ever, adequately, mirror (*re-present*) what was there? The crisis was expressed in a new appeal to a nihilistic (or ambivalent) silence – the closing lines of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, the parables of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the frozen heights and amnesia of Thomas Mann’s sanatorium on the Magic mountain, Malévitch’s *Blanc sur fond blanc*. Walter Benjamin asks ‘What does language communicate? . . . Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question “What does language communicate?” is therefore “All language communicates itself.”’⁶ The essay from which this comes, ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, is probably contemporary with Barth’s massive unveiling of his theology of the Word in the opening volume of *Church Dogmatics*.

Barth stood biographically amid a growing concern with and for the character of language. Before him, the foundations had been laid for a philosophy of meaning and representation (*Sprachphilosophie*) through the work of Hamann (1730–88),

⁶ Included in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1985), p. 109.

Herder (1744–1803), Humboldt (1767–1835) and the Czech priest Bolzano (1781–1848). Surrounding him was the continuation and modification of that tradition – with Cassirer and Saussure on one side, Carnap and Wittgenstein on another, Benjamin and Heidegger on yet another and the philosophers of dialogue, or *Rede* (Ebner, Rosenzweig, Buber and Rosenstock-Huussy) on a fourth. There were others whose work still mined the rich seams of German philology, such as Karl Vossler, whose book *The Spirit of Language in Civilization* (1925) summed up a whole idealistic tradition. I am not arguing that Barth was familiar with the extent of the debate and the details of various philosophies of language; I simply wish to point out that this was the context within which he was situated when he came to consider the relationship between the Word and words and the consequences of that relationship for theology. Furthermore, there is some evidence that he did have contact with certain aspects of this debate.

To examine Barth's theology of language and its association with his Christology in the context of this crisis of representation is, therefore, not only important for understanding Barth. It is also important for examining the relationship between Logos and language at quite a dramatic point in the history of theological and philosophical thought.

Furthermore, those philosophical debates about language in the earlier part of this century have not waned in significance. Rather, they have stirred up great dust-clouds among the ruins of Babel. The work of Saussure (and then Benveniste), the Moscow (and then the Prague) linguistic circles, Heidegger and Wittgenstein, provided the joists for postmodern models of discourse. Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva inherited the legacy of those whose work formed the context for Karl Barth's. In beginning with Barth, then, I am concerned not simply with positioning him within an historical and philosophical context – I am attempting to analyse a problematic that remains a relevant problematic for theologies and Christologies of today. For a reaction against idealism's espousal of an absolute meaning able to stabilize and guarantee all reference, characterizes postmodern models of discourse. Derrida terms this immediate access through lan-

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guage to the defined and meaningful 'logocentrism'.⁷ Logocentric philosophers of language regard words as referring to people, objects and circumstances in the world. Words represent stable truths or facts. Derrida *et al.* criticize the metaphysical assumptions, even the ideologies, in such a view of language. Indeed, they criticize the metaphysics of language itself, which continually deceives us into believing that words are merely windows on the world. It is Barth's insight into the dialectical necessity of assuming that words name while also countering such an assumption that draws his theological work into the orbit of the postmodern debates.

Theologically, running parallel to the crisis of the representative sign was the crisis of Christology. In the wake of Enlightenment thinking theology was collapsing into philosophy and concern with the transcendent was yielding to a new immanentism. The reality of God had no need to be established upon His revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ.⁸ In the post-Newtonian

⁷ Derrida did not coin the word 'logocentrism', he is merely the first to use it extensively and systematically. Its early uses are very general. *Le Robert* defines it as only recorded in academic contexts where it is understood as '*Attitude philosophique conférant au langage la place centrale dans toute métaphysique*'. Its history in the French language goes back to 1942. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers a more terse definition, 'Centred on reason'. It records, rather interestingly, that the first use of the word in English was by the theologian V. A. Demant in 1939. The German *Logozentrisch* is found earlier, in the vast *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* written by Ludwig Klages, the philosopher and psychologist, between 1929 and 1932. It is defined by Brockhaus as '*die den Geist als logisch-metaphysisch ordendes Prinzip in den Mittelpunkt stellen. Gegensatz – biozentrisch*'.

Earlier this century, it appears, 'logocentrism' concerned the character of ordered representation and reference, and, by extension, the philosophical debates on the relationship of mind to reality, body to soul. Derrida, in *Of Grammatology and Speech and Phenomena*, unearths from the word significant theological connotations. As his translator, Gayatri Spivak, observes, logocentrism comes to mean 'the belief that the first and the last things are the Logos, the Word, the Divine Mind, the infinite understanding of God, an infinitely creative subjectivity, and, closer to our time, the self-presence of full consciousness', 'Translator's Preface', *Of Grammatology*, p. lxviii. Spivak's definition draws together Derrida's analysis of logocentrism in Plato and Husserl, but something yet remains lest we forget. And too easily it is forgotten. Certainly Spivak's single sentence elides a very important distinction. The distinction, that is, between logocentrism as relating language and metaphysics to the Divine Mind of God, to the Word of God, and logocentrism as relating language and metaphysics to a transcendental subjectivity. These two forms of logocentrism play an important role, as we shall see, in both Barth's work and any appreciation of Derrida's.

⁸ See here Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1987); and John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London: SCM, 1990), chapter 11.

universe, arguments for the existence of God discussed Jesus Christ in relation to miracles and prophecy.⁹ And with the rise of positivism in the nineteenth century, the concern with the historical Jesus focussed upon his ethical relevance, not his metaphysical claims.

It is not simply that with Barth we return to a theology that wished to reconceive Jesus of Nazareth as the Logos. Barth's predecessors (Ritschl, Herrmann and Harnack), despite their historical and ethical emphases, still wished to understand Jesus as the Son of God. But by primarily regarding the historical facts and the ethical implications as evidence for or expression of the Christological, these theologians opened themselves, in different degrees, to two problems. The first was a hermeneutical problem: the relationship between the contingent first-century events of Jesus' life and our twentieth- or nineteenth-century interpretation of them. This was a problem not adequately tackled until Heidegger developed his notion of the hermeneutical circle and Gadamer his model of dialectical horizons. Significantly, both thinkers recognized language as the hub of the hermeneutical problem. Dilthey, aware of the centrality of hermeneutics for the construction of historical worlds, nevertheless saw today and yesterday related organically, part to whole. Discovering the patterns of existence which linked the past to the present hindered the recognition of historical difference. The wholly other of the incarnation, the divinity of Christ, was eclipsed by the universal and the human. The second problem Barth's predecessors ran into, related to the first, was strictly theological. Does history not provide other figures whose lives express an ethical excellence? Why is Jesus in particular the Christ? And so the anthropological bias with which these theologians examined the life of Christ continued the dissolution of Christology. Christ was thrown into the winds of relativism.

With Barth's work a new Christological note is sounded. An historical *and* suprahistorical particularism is argued for. A new direction for theology was initiated. Barth stands, then, at the confluence of a new emphasis upon Christology and mediation,

⁹ See here A. E. McGrath, *The Making of Modern German Christology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

and the crisis of representation. His work, this book argues, is dominated by a concern to relate these two themes and reveal their intimate association.

Historically, Barth's theology is situated at a cultural juncture that profoundly influences us today. Fritz K. Ringer, in his classic study of the German educated middle classes between 1890 and 1933, writes: 'By the early 1920s, they were deeply convinced that they were living through a profound crisis, a "crisis of culture", of "learning", of "values", or of the "spirit".'¹⁰ The crisis of representation which we charted above was part of a wider crisis of legitimation and confidence in Western European civilization. (There appears to be a correspondence between semiotic, political and theological forms of representation.) It was a crisis intimately linked with the decline of idealism, the rise of positivism, the imperialism of technology and the mushrooming of what Adorno and Horkheimer called 'the culture industry'.¹¹

The word *Krisis* echoed through Prussian and Austrian literature from the 1880s and infected the German *Zeitgeist* well into the 1930s when the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, racing against a terminal illness, was attempting (ultimately in vain) to complete his monumental study *The Crisis of European Sciences*. Concurrently, another word was making its impact on the German language, the word 'Modern'. Towards the end of the nineteenth century German culture became preoccupied with the notion of modernism.¹² This reached fever-pitch in the early Weimar period¹³ as the work of Musil, Rilke, Mann, the Futurists and Dadaists triggered an aesthetic revolution. Briefly, modernism's programme was to 'make it new'. It courted the unconventional and nonconformist in a conscious effort to overthrow the traditional perspective and stock expectations. Its dynamism was aggressive, disruptive and even apocalyptic.

¹⁰ Fritz K. Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: the German Academic Community, 1890–1933* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 3.

¹¹ See *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1973), pp. 120–67.

¹² See 'The Name and Nature of Modernism' by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarland in *Modernism*, ed. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarland (London: Penguin, 1976).

¹³ See Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins*, p. 276.

Hostility to the First World War fed its anger against the *status quo* and its desire for a creativity that would be transcultural, transclass and transfrontier.

The extent to which today's 'postmodernism' is a 'post-modernism' (as someone like Rosalind Krauss would argue¹⁴), or ironically a pre-modernism (as Lyotard argues¹⁵) or is in fact a late development within modernism itself,¹⁶ remains a highly contentious issue, and one which I will not broach in this study. But Barth was born and raised among the cultural mandarins and his theology of the Word within our words was produced in the context of a modernism fuelled by *Krisis*. The radicalism, the iconoclasm and the prophetic tones of his second edition of *Romans* cannot be separated from, but rather augments our appreciation of, German culture at that time.¹⁷ And to the extent that we are the cultural heirs of modernism, and arguably are still caught up in its problems and paradoxes, then Barth's work is part of that legacy. Barth's work is an expression of the modernist dilemma, a dilemma closely associated with the crisis of representation – a crisis dominating postmodern thought. As Lyotard has recently said: 'Postmodernity is not a new age, it is the rewriting of some features modernity had tried or pretended to gain . . . such a rewriting, as has already been said, was for a long time active in modernity itself.'¹⁸

For those philosophical, theological and historical reasons, then, this book begins with the way Karl Barth attempts to bring together a theology of the Word as Christ, the revelation of God, with a philosophy of language.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section treats

¹⁴ See her essay, 'The Originality of the Avant-Garde' in *Zeitgeist in Babel: The Post-Modernist Controversy*, ed. Ingeborg Hoesterey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 66–79. See also *Weimar Culture: The Outsider as Insider*, Peter Gay (London: Penguin, 1969).

¹⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, trans. Geoffery Bennington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

¹⁶ See C. Barry Chabot's essay in *Zeitgeist in Babel*, pp. 22–41.

¹⁷ See here Stephen Webb's *Re-figuring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991) – chapter one; Richard Roberts' 'Barth and the Eschatology of Weimar: A Theology on its Way?' in *Theology on the Way?* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992); and Walter Lowe's *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ 'Rewriting Modernity', *SubStance*, 54 (1987), p. 8.

the development of Karl Barth's doctrine of the *analogia fidei*, placing his treatment of it in the context of *Sprachphilosophie* and *Redephilosophie*. It concludes by pointing out Barth's evident difficulty in defining the nature of a transcendental Word that is nevertheless immanently apprehensible in the language we speak and read. He is struggling to define the operation of a Logos beyond the embrace of any language system, that is, beyond logocentrism. The second section examines Barth's problematic as it is handled in the later work of his contemporary Heidegger, who is seen as making an important step towards a coherent and consistent account of Barth's problematic. But Heidegger's work, I will argue (as Heidegger himself argued), is not theological. It is the French philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, who, starting from Heidegger, presents a theological account of a transcendental Logos (*un logos de l'infini*) disrupting, while also providing the condition for, the logocentric (*un logos du fini*). Levinas's philosophy of Saying can then be directly compared with Barth's theology of the Word. The comparison reveals why Barth, as a theologian, cannot avoid the metaphysics of language, and, similarly, why Levinas, as a philosopher of language, cannot avoid being theological. But the comparison also reveals how much more penetrating is Barth's examination of the Otherness of God and the manner in which this Otherness both offers itself to and withholds itself from the language whereby we represent our knowledge of the divine. The final section looks at the model for discourse propounded by Jacques Derrida in dialogue with the work of Emmanuel Levinas. It analyses a relationship between Derrida's economy of *différance* and Barth's understanding of the *analogia fidei*. The conclusion argues that Barth's theology of the Word in relation to words – his *analogia fidei*, his Christology and incarnational theology – are theological readings of a law of textuality, a law of performance and repetition described by Derrida as the economy of *différance*. Or, looked at the other way around, I suggest that language is always and ineradicably theological.¹⁹

¹⁹ Barth's contemporary, Karl Vossler, in his book *The Spirit of Language and Civilization*, trans. Oscar Oesar (London: Kegan Paul, 1932), recognized exactly this point: 'in every language a peculiar upward urge manifests itself, which, in its ultimate orientation, is religious . . . religious in the widest sense of the spiritual', p. 50.

The burden of this book is, therefore, threefold. First, it is a new reading of Barth's work on the Word, a reading which attempts to show not simply his relevance but his centrality for theology in the midst of today's postmodern debates on rhetoric. Secondly, it is a reading of the theological significance of Derrida's work, particularly the operation in discourse of *différance*. It sets out to chart the relationship between Barth's theology of the Word and Derrida's analysis of discourse, both diachronically (in terms of the historical connections) and synchronically (in terms of the structural and thematic parallels). Thirdly, it argues for theology's necessarily intimate association with philosophies of language and representation. To return to those multiplying questions in Professor Lash's seminars, what I am arguing here is that theology's primary concern is with its own possibility, its own relationship as a discourse to the original *Deus dixit*. Hence theology always requires investigations into the nature of discourse and the character of its relationship with the Word of God. Because this is theology's fundamental concern, it has always been critical and suspicious of representation and so it is uniquely able to find a place in postmodern thinking. If my thesis and analysis suggest anything, they suggest that the time is ripe for a new theology of the Word, arising from a re-reading of Barth's.