

FIRST THINGS

HOW THE WORLD LOST ITS STORY

by Robert W. Jenson

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As our changing culture struggled to define itself, the theologian ROBERT W. JENSON mourned the missing narrative of a universe gone postmodern and mad. From the October 1993 issue.

I

It is the whole mission of the church to speak the gospel. As to what sort of thing “the gospel” may be, too many years ago I tried to explain that in a book with the title *Story and Promise*, and I still regard these two concepts as the best analytical characterization of the church’s message. It is the church’s constitutive task to tell the biblical narrative to the world in proclamation and to God in worship, and to do so in a fashion appropriate to the content of that narrative, that is, as a promise claimed from God and proclaimed to the world. It is the church’s mission to tell all who will listen, God included, that the God of Israel has raised his servant Jesus from the dead, and to unpack the soteriological and doxological import of that fact.

That book, however, was directed to the *modern* world, a world in which it was presumed that stories and promises make sense. What if these presumptions are losing hold? I will in this essay follow the fashion of referring to the present historical moment as the advent of a “*post modern*” world, because, as I am increasingly persuaded, the slogan does point to something real, a world that has no story and so cannot entertain promises. Two preliminary clarifications are, however, needed.

The first of these is that while the Western world is now “post”-modern in the sense that modernity is dying around us, it is not “post”-modern in the sense that any new thing is yet replacing it. Most of those who talk of postmodernism are belated disciples of Friedrich

Nietzsche. And to understand ourselves, we must indeed study Nietzsche. Specifically, we must learn from Nietzsche about *nihilism*, about an historical reality defined purely by negations. But only half of Nietzsche's prophecy shows any sign of being fulfilled. In Nietzsche's vision, the nihilism in which Western civilization ends was to be at once a collapse into decadence and the fulfillment of an absolute freedom. There would at once appear the hollow "last man" and the glorious "superman." The "last man" is plainly on the scene, but superman is so far missing. In my use of "postmodern," "post-" has purely apophatic force.

The second clarification is terminological. When general or theological historians refer to the "modern world" or "modernity," they mean the Western era dominated by the strategies and organizations of instrumental and critical reason. Whether they then date the beginning of modernity with the first appearances of the Enlightenment or earlier depends on their interpretation of Reformation and Renaissance.

But the term "postmodernism" became current outside this general discourse, within artistic and literary criticism, and in this other more specialized discourse, the "modernism" to which "post-" was prefixed has meant the sensibility that emerged in the arts around the turn of the present century, in deliberate *rejection* of the world shaped by Enlightenment and Romanticism, i.e., of the world otherwise called "modern." "Postmodernism" in its original use merely named a variant of that "modernist" sensibility itself, insofar as the avant-garde was perceived to have somehow survived itself.

When participants in and historians of the more general intellectual and spiritual culture outside the arts have subsequently come to speak of "postmodernism" in larger application, the "modern" to which something is said to be "post-" is modernity in its more general historical sense. Thus "postmodernism" in *this* use denotes the penetration into the wider spiritual and cultural life of that sensibility which appeared earlier in the arts and there was called precisely "modernism." That is, "postmodernism" *outside* the arts is the same thing as "modernism"—including "postmodernism" as there spoken of—*in* the arts. That a

“postmodernist” turn is seen in the general culture all these years after modernism/postmodernism appeared in the arts simply marks the usual historical lag between developments in the arts and analogous developments in politics and philosophy and theology and daily life.

II

The modern world, the world that instrumental and critical reason built, is falling about us. Modernity, it now becomes evident, has been all along eroding its own foundations; its projects and comforts have depended on an inheritance to which it has itself been inimical. Walter Lippmann spoke of “the acids of modernity”; as it turns out, the stones attacked by this acid have been those on which the modern world was itself erected. Analysts from all relevant disciplines converge on one insight: Modernity has lived on a moral and intellectual capital that it has not renewed, and indeed could not have renewed without denying itself. They moreover agree that this intellectual and moral capital was that built up by the Christian church’s long establishment in the West, also if they themselves do not share the church’s faith or even admire it.

Perhaps the fall of modernity will be complete in our lifetimes; perhaps it will occupy another century. However long it takes, any successor society is still too distant—or perhaps too precluded—to discern. It is the collapse itself amidst which the church must for the foreseeable future live and speak the gospel, it is modernity’s time of ending as such that constitutes the Western church’s postmodern mission field. As the church once lived and conducted her mission in the precisely *post*-Hellenistic and *post*-Roman-imperial world, remembering what had vanished but not knowing what if anything could come next, so the church must now live and conduct her mission in the precisely “post”-modern world.

The self-destruction of modernism can be described basically under two rubrics: story and promise. The question is what the church is now required to do with respect to each. First, story.

III

The modern world's typical way of knowing human life was what Hans Frei has taught theologians to call "realistic narrative." The novels of Jane Austen and James Baldwin are "realistic narratives"; so are the histories of Gibbon or your local newspaper; so are soap operas. "Realistic narrative" is a particular way of telling a sequence of events which is distinguished from other possible forms by two characteristics.

First, the sequential events are understood jointly to make a certain kind of sense—a dramatic kind of sense. Aristotle provided the classic specification of dramatically coherent narrative. In a dramatically good story, he said, each decisive event is unpredictable until it happens, but immediately upon taking place is seen to be exactly what "had" to happen. So, to take the example of Aristotle's own favorite good story, we could not know in advance that Oedipus would blind himself but once he has done it instantly see that the whole story must lead to and flow from just this act.

Second, the sequential dramatic coherence is of a sort that could "really" happen, i.e., happen in a presumed factual world "out there," external to the text. Thus Len Deighton's story of the Winter family did not in fact occupy time and space in pre-Nazi and Nazi Germany, but there is nothing in the story itself to say that it might not have. With this kind of narrative the question of whether the story depicts something beyond itself, and if it does, how accurately, are therefore subsequent and independent questions.

But now notice two things supposed by this way of reporting our lives to ourselves. First and obviously, it is supposed that stories dramatically coherent a la Aristotle are the *appropriate way* to understand our human task and possibility. The modern West has supposed that living on the patterns of King Lear or Horatio Alger is appropriate to beings of the sort we are, and living on the patterns of a schizophrenic or Till Eulenspiegel is not. We have supposed that we somehow "ought" to be able to make dramatic sense of our lives. (We should note that humankind does not universally share the supposition: Not shamanist cultures nor Confucian or Taoist China nor the high Indian religions suppose any such thing.)

And it is further supposed that some stories dramatically coherent a la Aristotle are “realistic,” that is, that they may be fitted to the “real” world, the world as it is in itself prior to our storytelling. The use of realistic narrative as the normal way of understanding human existence supposes that reality out there, “the world” itself, makes dramatic sense a la Aristotle, into which narrative the stories we tell about ourselves can and sometimes do fit. Put it this way: The way in which the modern West has talked about human life supposes that an omniscient historian could write a *universal* history, and that this is so because the universe with inclusion of our lives is in fact a story written by a sort of omnipotent novelist.

That is to say, modernity has supposed we inhabit what I will call a “narratable world.” Modernity has supposed that the world “out there” is such that stories can be told that are true *to it*. And modernity has supposed that the reason narratives can be true to the world is that the world somehow “has” its own true story, antecedent to, and enabling of, the stories we tell about ourselves in it.

There is no mystery about how Western modernity came by this supposition. The supposition is straightforwardly a secularization of Jewish and Christian practice—as indeed these are the source of most key suppositions of Western intellectual and moral life. The archetypical body of realistic narrative is precisely the Bible; and the realistic narratives of Western modernity have every one been composed in, typically quite conscious, imitation of biblical narrative. Aristotle’s definition found its future through a strange channel.

Postmodernism is characterized by the loss of this supposition in all of its aspects. We can see this most vividly in literature. The paradigmatic fictional works of the twentieth century either present accounts that make dramatic sense in themselves, but tell of events or sequences that could not occur in the world outside the storytelling; or they meticulously describe events that could occur or perhaps actually have occurred in “the real world,” but in such fashion as to display precisely their lack of dramatic coherence. Gunter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* may serve as an

example of the first mode, Sartre's *Nausea* as an example of the second, and Joyce's *Ulysses* of both at once.

The same modes appear in the visual arts. The classical visual art of the modern West was at once realistic and narrative; it portrayed the world beyond itself, and constrained within itself some portion of a narrative possible in that world. Thus one of Velasquez's royal family portraits depicts both a set of actual and recognizable human individuals, and relationships between them that can be described only by narrative.

Modernist/postmodernist art is in most of its modes defined precisely by a passion to avoid any such portrayal. Most usually this is done by elevating the formal or expressive aspects of the act or product of art to be themselves the subject-matter of the work. I have long remembered the remark of a notable art critic—though I have forgotten which one—that many modernist paintings could be understood as *fragments* of classical painting blown up for their own sake, displaying the formal and technical elements by which painting is accomplished but eschewing the narrative depiction within which such patches of paint on canvas would earlier have had their place.

But there is also a meticulously realistic modernism that carefully reproduces pieces of the world out there, but in such fashion as either to tell a story that is impossible in the world, as in surrealism, or to alienate the depicted reality altogether from our quest for coherence. So every item in a painting by Magritte is an item of our accustomed world, and yet nothing hangs together in the way we expect; we cannot make out what story has been, or will be, going on with the persons and objects depicted. And precisely to induce this schizophrenic apprehension in us was the stated purpose for which Magritte and other surrealists and modernist realists have made their works.

If there is little mystery about where the West got its faith in a narratable world, neither is there much mystery about how the West has lost this faith. The entire project of the Enlightenment

was to maintain realist faith while declaring disallegiance from the God who was that faith's object. The story the Bible tells is asserted to be the story of God with His creatures; that is, it is both assumed and explicitly asserted that there is a true story about the universe because there is a universal novelist/historian. Modernity was defined by the attempt to live in a universal story without a universal storyteller.

The experiment has failed. It is, after the fact, obvious that it had to: If there is no universal storyteller, then the universe can have no story line. Neither you nor I nor all of us together can so shape the world that it can make narrative sense; if God does not invent the world's story, then it has none, then the world has no narrative that is its own. If there is no God, or indeed if there is some other God than the God of the Bible, there is no narratable world.

Moreover, if there is not the biblical God, then realistic narrative is not a plausible means for our human self-understanding. Human consciousness is too obscure a mystery to itself for us to script our own lives. Modernity has added a new genre of theater to the classic tragedy and comedy: the absurdist drama that displays precisely an absence of dramatic coherence.

Sometimes such drama depicts a long sequence of events with no turning points or denouement; sometimes it displays the absence of any events at all. Samuel Beckett has, of course, written the arch-examples of both, with *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape*. If we would be instructed in the postmodern world, we should seek out a performance of Beckett—the postmodern world is the world according to Beckett.

The arts are good for diagnosis, both because they offer a controlled experience and because they always anticipate what will come later in the general culture. But the general culture has now caught up with postmodernism, and for experience of the *fact*, we should turn from elite art to the streets of our cities and the classrooms of our suburbs, to our congregations and churchly institutions, and to the culture gaps that rend them.

There we will find folk who simply do not apprehend or inhabit a narratable world. Indeed, many do not know that anyone ever did. The reason so many now cannot “find their place” is that they are unaware of the possibility of a kind of world or society that could have such things as places, though they may recite, as a sort of mantra, memorized phrases about “getting my life together” and the like. There are now many who do not and cannot understand their lives as realistic narrative. John Cage or Frank Stella; one of my suburban Minnesota students whose reality is rock music, his penis, and at the very fringes some awareness that to support both of these medical school might be nice; a New York street dude; the pillar of her congregation who one day casually reveals that of course she *believes* none of it, that her Christianity is a relativistic game that could easily be replaced altogether by some other religion or yoga—all inhabit a world of which no stories can be true.

IV

So how, with respect to “story,” must the church’s mission now be conducted? The prescription itself is obvious and simple, carrying it out hard and in some situations perhaps impossible.

Throughout modernity, the church has presumed that its mission was directed to persons who *already* understood themselves as inhabitants of a narratable world. Moreover, since the God of a narratable world is the God of Scripture, the church was also able to presume that the narrative sense people had antecedently tried to make of their lives had somehow to cohere with the particular story, “the gospel,” that the church had to communicate. Somebody who could read Rex Stout or the morning paper with pleasure and increase of self-understanding was for that very reason taken as already situated to grasp the church’s message (which did not of course mean that he or she would necessarily believe it). In effect, the church could say to her hearers: “You know that story you think you must be living out in the real world? We are here to tell you about its turning point and outcome.”

But this is precisely what the postmodern church cannot presume. What then? The obvious answer is that if the church does not *find* her hearers antecedently inhabiting a narratable world, then the church must herself *be* that world.

The church has in fact had great experience of just this role. One of many analogies between postmodernity and dying antiquity—in which the church lived for her most creative period—is that the late antique world also insisted on being a meaningless chaos, and that the church had to save her converts by offering herself as the narratable world within which life could be lived with dramatic coherence. Israel had been the nation that lived a realistic narrative amid nations that lived otherwise; the church offered herself to the gentiles as their Israel. The church so constituted herself in her *liturgy*.

For the ancient church, the walls of the place of Eucharist, whether these were the walls of a basement or of Hagia Sophia or of an imaginary circle in the desert, enclosed a world. And the great drama of the Eucharist was the narrative life of that world. Nor was this a fictive world, for its drama is precisely the “real” presence of all reality’s true author, elsewhere denied. The classic liturgical action of the church was not about anything else at all; it was itself the reality about which truth could be told.

In the postmodern world, if a congregation or churchly agency wants to be “relevant,” here is the first step: It must recover the classic liturgy of the church, in all its dramatic density, sensual actuality, and brutal realism, and make this the one exclusive center of its life. In the postmodern world, all else must at best be decoration and more likely distraction.

Out there—and that is exactly how we must again begin to speak of the society in which the church finds itself—there is no narratable world. But absent a narratable world, the church’s hearers cannot believe or even understand the gospel story—or any other momentous story. If the church is not herself a real, substantial, living world to which the gospel can be true, faith is quite simply impossible.

Protestantism has been modernity's specific form of Christianity. Protestantism supposed that addressees of the gospel already inhabited the narratable world in which stories like the gospel could be believed, and that we therefore could dismantle the gospel's own liturgical world, which earlier times of the church had created. Protestantism has from the beginning supposed that the real action is in the world, and that what happens "in church" can only be preparation to get back out into reality. This was always a wrong judgment—indeed a remarkable piece of naiveté—but the blunder is understandable and in the modern world Protestantism could, just barely, get away with it. In a postmodern world, those days are gone forever.

Of course ritual as such is not the point; the point is the church's reality as herself a specific real narrated world. Which leads to a further matter.

To be a real world for her members, and not just a ritual illusion, the church must pay the closest attention to the substance of her liturgical gatherings and to their constitutive language. If the church's interior drama is not fiction, this is because the subject of that drama is a particular God, the Creator-God who authors all reality. If liturgy is not to be sickly pretense, if it is to be real presence of reality's God, everything must enact the specific story Scripture actually tells about that particular God. Two polemical points here insist on hearing, and come together in a third.

Polemical point one: the story is not your story or my story or "his-story" or "her-story" or some neat story someone read or made up. The story of the sermon and of the hymns and of the processions and of the sacramental acts and of the readings is to be God's story, the story of the Bible. Preachers are the greatest sinners here: the text already is and belongs to the one true story, it does need to be helped out in this respect. What is said and enacted in the church must be with the greatest exactitude and faithfulness and exclusivity the story of creation and redemption by the God of Israel and Father of the risen Christ. As we used to say: Period.

Polemical point two: modern Christianity, i.e., Protestantism, has regularly substituted slogans for narrative, both in teaching and in liturgy. It has supposed that hearers already knew they had a story and even already knew its basic plot, so that all that needed to be done was to point up certain features of the story—that it is “justifying,” or “liberating,” or whatever. The supposition was always misguided, but sometimes the church got away with it. In the postmodern world, this sort of preaching and teaching and liturgical composition merely expresses the desperation of those who in their meaningless world can believe nothing but vaguely wish they could.

Now the synthetic polemical point: There *is* one slogan-like phrase that is precisely a maximally compressed version of the one God’s particular story. This is the revealed name, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” It is thus no accident at all that in our postmodern situation, the struggle between realistic faith and religious wool-gathering settles into a struggle over this name. The triune name evokes God as the three actors of His one story, and places the three in their actual narrative relation. Substitutes do not and cannot do this; “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier,” for example, neither narrates nor specifically names, for creating, redeeming, and sanctifying are timelessly actual aspects of the biblical God’s activity, and are moreover things that *all* putative gods somehow do. In the postmodern situation, we will easily recognize congregations and agencies that know what world they inhabit by their love and fidelity to the triune name; and we will recognize antiquated Protestantism by its uneasiness with the triune name.

V

So much for story. Now for *promise*. Here too modernity was constituted by secularization of an aspect of Christian faith. The gospel is ineradicably an eschatological message, it tells its story as the story of created time’s end and fulfillment. Modernity’s secularized version of eschatological faith was its notorious confidence in progress, and was constitutive for modernity’s whole practice and self-understanding. In its liberal version, confidence in progress shaped Europe and founded the United States. In its Marxist and pre-Marxist versions, confidence in progress fueled the great modern revolutions.

In a world that was progressing, or thought it was, Protestantism supposed the church's role was to provide motivation and direction for movement that was anyway occurring. In the most recent and already rather quaint version of this supposition, it was said to be the church's role to look around the world to see where God was at work, and then jump in to help. This—again—was always a remarkable piece of naiveté, but occasionally someone got away with it.

The First World War terminated Western Europe's liberal faith in progress; and disastrous experiment has now terminated the Marxist version. America escaped the worst devastations of the wars and has always been more exclusively shaped by modernity than other nations, and so held on a couple of generations longer; now America too seems slowly to be accepting the evidence.

Modernity's hope was in progress; the model of this hope was biblical hope in God as the Coming One, the Eschatos. Modernity cannot hope in the biblical God, founded as it is in a declaration of independence from him. Therefore, when hope in progress has been discredited, modernity has no resource either for renewing it or for acquiring any other sort of hope. The mere negation of faith in progress is sheer lack of hope; and hopelessness is the very definition of postmodernism.

Much modernist/postmodernist literature and art is directly and thematically either lamentation about, or defiant proclamation of, hopelessness: promises, our artists tell us in drumbeat monotony, should not be made, because they cannot be kept. Promises, in the postmodern world, are inauthentic simply because they are promises, because they commit a future that is not ours to commit. Where the impossibility of promise appears less thematically and more formally, it runs together with the renunciation of plotted narrative instanced earlier: Promises can be made only if reality is getting someplace, that is, if it has a plotted story.

And again, while the arts are diagnostic, the condition they reveal is the condition of our streets and institutions. The impossibility of promises is there our daily experience. And in this matter,

we have a paradigm case, in which the whole situation is instantly manifest and which I need only name. There is a human promise that is the closest possible creaturely approach to unconditional divine promise, and that is therefore throughout Scripture the chosen analog of divine promise: the marital promise of faithfulness unto death. Among us, that promise has become a near impossibility, socially, morally, and even legally.

VI

So again, how, in a world that entertains no promises, is the church to speak her eschatological hope with any public plausibility? There is one line here that obviously must be followed: The church must herself be a communal world in which promises are made and kept. But this line has already been pursued with enormous energy by Stanley Hauerwas, whose work deserves its own study. Let me take the question in a different direction.

It is the whole vision of an Eschaton that is now missing outside the church. The assembly of believers must therefore itself be the event in which we may behold what is to come. Nor is this necessity new in the life of the church. For what purpose, after all, do we think John the Seer recorded his visions?

If, in the *post*-modern world, a congregation or whatever wants to be “relevant,” its assemblies must be unabashedly events of shared apocalyptic vision. “Going to church” must be a journey to the place where we will behold our destiny, where we will see what is to come of us.

Modernity’s version of Christianity—that is, Protestantism—has been shy of vision and apocalypse alike. Just so, its day is over. As before, I can see two aspects of the new mandate.

First and most obviously, preaching and teaching and hymns and prayers and processions and sacramental texts must no longer be shy about describing just what the gospel promises, what the Lord has in store. Will the city’s streets be paved with gold? Modernity’s preaching and teaching—and even its hymnody and sacramental texts—hastened to say, “Well, no, not really.” And having said that, it had no more to say. In modern Christianity’s discourse, the gospel’s eschatology died the death of a few quick qualifications.

The truly necessary qualification is not that the City's streets will not be paved with real gold, but that gold as we know it is not real gold, such as the City will be paved with. What is the matter with gold anyway? Will goldsmiths who gain the Kingdom have nothing to do there? To stay with this one little piece of the vision, our discourse must learn again to revel in the beauty and flexibility and integrity of gold, of the City's true gold, and to say exactly why the world the risen Jesus will make must of course be golden, must be and will be beautiful and flexible and integral as is no earthly city. And so on and on.

Because Jesus lives to triumph, there will be the real Community, with its real Banquet in its real City amid its real Splendor, as no penultimate community or banquet or city or splendor is really just and loving or tasty or civilized or golden. The church has to rehearse that sentence in all her assemblings, explicitly and in detail.

Second, the church's assemblies must again become occasions of *seeing*. We are told by Scripture that in the Kingdom this world's dimness of sight will be replaced by, as the old theology said it, "beatific vision." It is a right biblical insight that God first of all *speaks* and that our community with him and each other is first of all that we *hear* him and speak to him. It does not, however, follow, as Protestantism has made it follow, that to listen and speak we must blind ourselves. In this age, accurate hearing is paired with dimmed vision; it is precisely a promised chief mark of the Eschaton that accurate hearing will then be accompanied by glorious sight. And in this age, the church must be the place where beatific vision is anticipated and trained.

Late antiquity suffered and lamented the same blindness with which postmodernity is afflicted, the same inability to see any Fulfillment up there before us. Gradually, as the church worked out the theology, the church made herself a place of such seeing. She did this with the icons of the East and the windows and statues of the West. Protestantism supposed that folk in the civil society already envisioned glorious Fulfillment, and needed no specific churchly envisioning, and therefore Protestantism for the most part eliminated the images and even where it retained

them forgot how to use them. Protestantism's reliance on the world was here too an illusion, but here too an illusion it got away with for modernity's time. That time is over.

If we are in our time rightly to apprehend the eschatological reality of the gospel promise, we have to hear it with Christ the risen Lord visibly looming over our heads and with His living and dead saints visibly gathered around us. Above all, the church must celebrate the Eucharist as the dramatic depiction, and as the succession of tableaux, that it intrinsically is. How can we point our lives to the Kingdom's great Banquet, if its foretaste is spread before us with all the beauty of a McDonald's counter?

VII

A necessary afterword, lest all the above be misunderstood. It was modernity's great contribution to Christian history to have recognized the church's mandated preferential options for the poor and oppressed with a clarity previously cultivated only in the monastic orders. It was perhaps the real substance of Protestantism that it demanded that all believers live with the attention to justice and charity which had for centuries been demanded only of those under special vows. We must maintain modernity's insight. The church must indeed pursue God's action in the world.

But modernity's contribution will be lost if the church fails to notice that modernity is dying, and to face the new necessities mandated in that death. And *those* necessities—which I surely have not exhausted—are necessities of concretion and density and vision laid upon the life of the church within herself.

Robert W. Jenson's latest work is a theological commentary on the Book of Ezekiel for Brazos Press.