Winter 1993

Words of Hope: A Postmodern Faith

Samuel Smith
Messiah College, ssmith@messiah.edu

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.

WORDS OF HOPE: A POSTMODERN FAITH

SAMUEL SMITH
  Assistant Professor of English
    Messiah College

> What we see now is like a dim image in a
> mirror; then we shall see face-to-face.
> What I know now is only partial; then it
> will be complete-as complete as God's
> knowledge of me.
> St. Paul, 1
>   Corinthians 13:12

I would like to respond to Paul Nisly's recent essay,

"A Word of Hope," published in Faculty Dialogue 17 (Spring

1992): 113-17. That essay strikes me as a fairly typical

evangelical response to postmodern literary discourse, and I

wish to address Nisly's articulation of that response as an

accurate representation of a large sector of the evangelical

literary and hermeneutical community. I will offer a

critical response to some of the problems raised by Nisly's

paradigmatic stance toward language and texts.1 I profess

English at Messiah College, so I am a member of a community

which is committed to identifying and understanding humanity

in terms of the Christian story. I believe the essence of

this gospel to be God's presence in Christ reconciling the

world to God.

To begin, while I disagree with Nisly's assessment of

postmodern literary criticism, I too believe that "words,

though limited, are God's gift to us humans" (113, my

emphasis). But I do not believe that words are limited to

"a meaning which we can discover" (113). The sense of

discovering meaning occurs when we learn what our (or

another) interpretive community means by certain words or

groups of words; but the meaning of those words has been

created, revised, and often reshaped by the human community

that generated those words and through which those words

have passed. So there is a sense that as communities and

individuals we also use words to create and shape meaning.

In fact, that is the central thesis of postmodernism: the

creating and shaping of meaning by human communities and by

individuals thinking, speaking, and acting within the

context of communities.

For this reason I find Nisly's identification of what

he calls "postmodern meaninglessness" an inaccurate representation of
postmodern literary critical dialogue as a

whole. He misrepresents postmodernism by identifying only

its extreme formulations, and this enables him to describe

postmodern thinkers as absolute relativists who play

hide-and-seek games behind obscure and impenetrable language

(you would think they were all apocalypticists). But are

all postmodernists absolute relativists? Nisly would have

us believe so: "All language and all knowledge-we are told,

usually much less succinctly-is a matter of perspective;

your perspective, my perspective, anyone's perspective; and

no perspective is to be trusted" (114). I believe it is

true that all language and all knowledge is a matter of

perspective (and if you wish to hear a postmodernist say

this succinctly in "plain" language you should read Stanley

Fish). But most postmodernists do not identify that

perspective as subjectively as Nisly identifies it here.

That perspective is individual and personal in a real sense,

but it is just as significantly grounded in communal

understanding and in historically authorized paradigms that

have enabled clear and understandable agreement about

humanity and the universe until new paradigms displace or

supplement them (as when a Luther or an Einstein or a Freud comes along). Thus it is not true, as Nisly asserts, that the "postmodern view of language is rooted in a profound skepticism about the possibility of arriving at any commonality of meaning, any truth" (114). On the contrary, postmodernist views of language are often rooted in a profound humility regarding the limitations of human understanding and the seemingly infinite possibilities of human speech. Most postmodernists assume that humans in community are every day arriving at commonality of meaning and truth (notice how much and how often they are talking intelligibly to one another?). For the postmodernist, meaning and perspective is shaped and understood in the context of interpretative communities, and this results in hope as often as despair, and in dialogue more than monologue (more meaning negotiated, less meaning assumed).

Nisly's own apparent assumptions about language lead him to mistakenly identify postmodern theories of language with particular postmodern worldviews: "Much of

contemporary literary theory is based on a worldview which

is-after one cuts through the complex verbiage-very similar

to Hazel Motes'. In brief, there is no truth, there are

only (possibly) useful interpretations for our times." (114)

But the "useful interpretations for our times" are the

truths by which we live: one century according to the laws

of Newtonian physics, or salvation through Church

sacraments, or the belief that St. Paul had forbidden women

to exercise leadership roles in the Church, and the next

century by the laws of Einsteinian physics, or salvation

through Luther's understanding of justification, or new

understanding that contextualizes St. Paul's comments in

favor of women assuming leadership roles in the Church. In

fact, a short review of the history of the interpretation of

the Bible reveals the Church changing its understanding of

Jesus and important texts like the letters of St. Paul.

Members of a given Christian community situated in a

particular time and place have lived by the interpretations

and understandings dominant for their particular time and

place.2 The postmodern thesis that humans can assert only

interpretations, not absolute knowledge, strikes me as a very orthodox recognition of the finiteness of human understanding.

The second rather unfair criticism that Nisly alleges against postmodernists is their supposedly impossibly obscure terminology. He approvingly quotes Victor Brombert's remarks from his 1989 MLA Presidential Address: there has been a "general tendency [for the literary critic] to seek refuge in a highly specialized terminology, to lock oneself up in hermetic discourse allowing for no intellectual commerce" (114). And at first this seems true, but this generalization ignores the rather substantial intellectual commerce going on among postmodernists, a commerce that often crosses national, racial, gender, and communal boundaries other discourse communities fail to cross. Two pages later Nisly quotes Brombert's caricature of postmodern critical discourse: there is "considerable silliness in most sophisticated contemporary criticism: pretentious gibberish in the articles and books that flow from our presses, hermetic clowning at tiresome symposia"

(116). I agree that many of the books and articles finding

their way into print in the humanities are not worthy of the

natural resources required to make them possible. But I

attribute this more to the pressure to publish than to

postmodern epistemologies and metaphysics. The truth is

that we are often as communities confronted with new

vocabularies or new ways of talking and negotiating meaning

that require the work of understanding on our part if we

wish to participate in the dialogues which these new

discourses enable.

Allow me to illustrate what I mean with a rather

non-academic example. I remember attending a Larry Norman

concert during the late 1970's , and he portrayed the

problems of Christian fundamentalist "witnessing" language

by imagining this scene: the Christian witness approaches a

man on the street and says, "Have you been born again,

brother?"

The man pauses, puzzled, and replies, "I don't believe

in reincarnation, and I can only remember having one

mother."

Stymied, the Christian witness starts over. "No, what I mean is, have you been saved?"

The witnessee ponders a moment and answers, "Well, several summers ago I was swimming in the lake at summer camp, and I started to drown, and the lifeguard rescued me, so I suppose you could say, 'yes, I have been saved.'"

Frustrated now, the Christian says with exasperation, "No, that's not it at all! I want to know if you've been washed in the blood of the lamb!"

The equally frustrated witnessee replies, "Ugh, I hope not!"

Norman's simple scenario about the problems of special fundamentalist Christian jargon illustrates how every community develops language that shapes its understanding but does not often easily communicate without extensive explanation and translation into the language of another community. (These same fundamentalist Christians who take my first-year courses at Messiah College get a great deal of sympathy from me-I was reared a fundamentalist-when they balk at terms like Nisly's "Creative Word." These students

typically say something like, "Well, if he meant Jesus

Christ, why didn't he just say Jesus Christ?" A response

such as "Well, that's not exactly what he wants to say"

arouses their suspicion.)

In the literary community, this happens at a slightly

more complex level. I remember attending the 1987 Mideast

Regional Conference on Christianity and Literature at

Lynchburg College where Wheaton College Professor of English

Leland Ryken delivered a banquet speech that parodied and

indicted postmodernist discourse for what Brombert calls its

"pretentious gibberish" and "hermetic clowning." It was a

good time, and since most of us were members of the

evangelical and literary communities we understood each

other and laughed. But as I reflect on Ryken's performance

and the audience's general resistance to postmodern

discourse with its threat to their understanding of

Christian faith (and life in general) and its demand for

hard intellectual work for understanding, I am able to

imagine similar moments in earlier history.

During the fifth century A.D., a group of local Roman

pagan scholars gather at the local academy for a banquet and

address by one of their most admired members. Comfortable

in their centuries-old understanding of Stoic thinking,

these pagans laugh as their speaker spoofs and parodies the

new jargon emerging from the recent Church councils. But

instead of playing with terms like differance, implied

reader, aporia, phallocentric, or Transcendental Signified,

the speaker offers play on words like trinity, substance,

hypostatic union, immaculate conception (from the same

council who gave us hypostatic union!), and original sin.

The speaker finishes with a parodic paraphrase of the

obscure and impenetrable prose of Augustine amid belly

laughter and flowing tears.

    Or imagine a similar banquet occurring in late

sixteenth-century Italy, where a group of Catholic scholars

gather to poke fun at the new thinking and vocabulary of

"Protestants." Now the new, bizarre terms tossed around

are terms like scripture interprets scripture (talk about

speech-acts!), substitutionary atonement, priesthood of he

believer, and presbyterian, and there is some laughter (and

concern, for they, like Ryken's audience are being

threatened) at the New Historicist and deconstructionist

readings of the Book of Revelation being performed by the

strange Englishman John Bale and John Foxe, and perhaps they

raise their eyebrows and ire at that expatriated French

nihilist, John Calvin.

These imagined anecdotes reveal that new words and new

ways of speaking and negotiating meaning make possible new

understandings of God, humanity, and the universe. And the

history of religions and the history of the Christian

religion in particular suggests that using language to

create and shape communal and individual knowledge enables

humans to define (set boundaries) and extend (push those

boundaries out, even over) their knowledge and

understanding. Indeed, in its origin the Christian religion

was an astonishing combination of an old vocabulary infused

with radical new meanings and a bold new vocabulary that

enabled human imaginations to stretch into new

understandings of God and God's love: the result was faith,

meaning, and new life for both individuals and communities.

In this light, I find it ironic that Christian

academics would censure postmodernists for new words and new

structures of thought when in most situations they would, as

a professors of the Humanities, both welcome and encourage

the learning of new vocabulary and new structures of thought

as a good thing that broadens and deepens thinking and

enables understanding. For example, I am sure most English

professors would be pleased that I introduce freshmen to the

new language of literary criticism in my course in English

Literature to 1660. I require them to learn such wonders as

anagogical interpretation, pastoral elegy, oxymoron, terza

rima, catharsis, romance epic (this one is not at all what

they first imagine), and conceit (this too is not what they

think). And because as a college professor I am granted a

bit of authority, and because students want to join the

conversation that knowing these terms makes possible, they

do the hard work of learning handbook definitions and

applying them in the "required" contexts (they really read

these definitions as absolutely authoritative until I reveal

their conventional nature by adjusting some of them in the

context of the literature we read). The only difference

between the freshman experience of learning new literary

terms and the experience of the literary critic who engages

postmodernist discourse is that the terms and discourse

learned by freshmen enjoy the broader authorization of the

literary community-they enjoy a more privileged status than

other similarly conventional terms and structures of new

"radical" discourses.

    I am doing the work of reading and understanding

postmodern thinkers like Stanley Fish, David Bleich,

Patricinio Schweickart, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, and

yes, even Jacques Derrida. It is true that Fish, Bleich,

and Schweickart are easier to read than Barthes, Kristeva,

and Derrida. They have the advantage of being native

speakers of American English with the kind of helpful

knowledge conventionally authorized by American communities.

But they are postmodernists who speak clearly in

vocabularies and structures even my students understand. (I

don't use postmodernist terminology in the classroom very

often, and yet I consistently teach as a postmodern

Christian.) In fact, learning the language of postmodernism

has been very much like my experience in learning the

languages and jargon of other disciplines such as

psychology, theology, and philosophy. And even the

evangelical community is filled with the most casual use of

the once new and obscure vocabularies of Marx, Freud, and

Jung (not to mention the apostle Paul). To finally exclude

the wisdom of postmodern thinking from Christian discourse

because the discourse is unfamiliar and perhaps difficult at

moments is to refuse to do the kind of work that any convert

to a Fundamentalist expression of evangelical Christianity

performs in order to master the knowledge of her salvation,

sanctification, and eschatological future in the space of

years or even months. After all, no one can deny that

Christian communities foster as much esoteric jargon as most

academic communities. Stop and think about an individual

from one Christian community who bothers to eavesdrop on an

"in-house" theological conversation between members of

another Christian community.

　　Finally, it is because I have both strengthened and

extended my understanding of and commitment to the Christian

story by reading and thinking through the discourse of

postmodernists like Stanley Fish and David Bleich that I

find most evangelical Christian representations and

assessments of postmodernism uninformed, oversimplified, and

unconvincing. And I don't find postmodernist epistemologies

threatening to either my Christian understanding of God or

my faith in God.

   While I believe that my argument for learning new

vocabularies might actually persuade those who take a stance

similar to Nisley's, I suspect we will have more difficulty

with a second difference. Nisly asserts a foundational

tenet in his essay which I cannot, with anything like

conviction, espouse or commit myself to. Nisly believes in

the autonomous work: "yet our goal is to hear what the work

itself has to say" (116). What is the "work itself" apart

from the experience of a reader in community? Nisly here

echoes his earlier conventional bifurcation of "the primary

text and the interpretive word" (114). Such a dichotomy

will not stand under scrutiny. I see two problems here.

First, readers do not read texts and then interpret them.

Encountering texts with a particular worldview (often

well-developed even if the reader is not self-conscious of

it) or set of basic and not-so-basic individual and communal

assumptions, readers interpret in the very act of reading:

readers are never not interpreting when they are reading.3

They may not be developing an organized and detailed

interpretation for public presentation, but they are always

already interpreting and understanding during the act of

reading. Second, every "work" or "primary text" (they seem

to be the same thing for Nisly) is an articulation of an

interpretation of human experience as it is perceived by a

human subject with a worldview disposition in the context of

a particular community. The reality of the layers of human

interpretation involved in language and experience cannot be

suppressed with assertions of the "work itself."

   I believe Paul Nisly intuitively knows this, as he

concedes crucial ground when he reiterates his theme:

   I have argued that language is a special gift,
   even a divine gift, and, further, I have contended

that within diversity we can work toward some
commonalities of meaning in the interpretation of
the text. The text does have its own integrity,
whether it is the biblical text, or the text of a
novel or play or poem or short story.
Interpretation is, however, a very human and
fallible art. (116)

"Exactly!" is the postmodernist reply. Interpretation is a

fallible art precisely because it is a human act; but as

Stanley Fish notes, "Interpretation is the only game in

town." Nisly's own language has made a very significant

shift here, as he is now talking about the text, not the

"work itself." But how does a text have

integrity-especially if that text has been transmitted over

centuries of human fallibility and was generated in the

context of a fallible human culture? A text that is not a

translation and does not have a re-publication history might

be credited with stability. But once we begin the act of

reading, we are never not interpreting the text, and the
minute we begin to discuss or write about the "text" we have

ventured into our understanding of the work as we have

constructed or deconstructed it during the act of reading

the text. The text cannot be equated with the novel or play

or poem or short story that we experience as readers. This

is why we have such wonderfully long and diverse histories

of the interpretation of many biblical texts, of Milton's

Eve, of Shakespeare's Hamlet, and Melville's white whale.

This is why every performance of Macbeth is another Macbeth.

The interpretation becomes/is the novel or play or poem or

short story for the reader interpreting/reading.

Paul Nisly's problematic sense of the text as work

informs one of his other very important assertions about

words and meaning. Nisly offers the following creed, safely

assuming communal support: "For we believe that both within

and behind the text there is meaning." But what is the

meaning "behind" the text? How does meaning get "behind"

the text? I turn the page and find more text (or the end

and so my own reflection).4 But since we share community, I

believe this remark is properly informed by-that is I

understand it in-the context of Nisly's earlier remark that

"the Creative Word, the Divine Word, who was from the

beginning with God, is linked with our ability to use words,

words which have meaningful content, words which we can

mutually explore" (115, my emphasis). This is for me the

most important sentence in Nisly's essay, and as a

postmodern Christian, I wholeheartedly affirm this.

   But "meaningful content" arises in the context of human

interpretative activity and nowhere else, and in the context

of our "mutual exploration" of textual significance. The

"meaningful content" worked out and decided on, however, is

authorized by the interpretative communities doing the work

of "mutual exploration," not by the "work" (or text) itself.

This is why both traditional Christians with absolutist

epistemological and metaphysical claims and postmodern

Christians with relativist epistemological and metaphysical

claims (don't be fooled into thinking I am not claiming

something quite understandable in this essay) keep talking,

writing, and dialoguing both with those who do and with

those who do not share their Christian faith.

   But the recognition that dialogue and "mutual

exploration" enable and provoke clarification and common

understanding (as in everyday responses like "what did you

mean by that?") also highlights that this is precisely what

written texts cannot do, especially if the author of the

text is dead. The problems with biblical texts are obvious.

Paul begins 1 Corinthians 7 (a vexed text, a source of great

physical and psychological pain in the history of the Church

interpreting and submitting to interpretations of the text)

by saying that he is answering certain questions posed by

the Corinthians. Nowhere are we told what these questions

are. We have no definitive context to assure our getting

Paul's intentions "right." And how do we read a term like

"inspiration" in 2 Timothy 3:16? The word is used only one

time in the New Testament and applies there only to the

Hebrew Scripture. It has perhaps as many definitions as
there are communities who care enough to try to give it

definite meaning. In fact, the human attempt to define the

meaning of inspiration and its ramifications has been

responsible for many of the dividing boundaries between

particular Christian communities. And why is Jesus

represented in the Gospel as cursing the fig tree? We have

no Gospel writer come from the grave to solve this crux. We

are left with our interpretive attempts, and we cannot write

or call the author even if the author could be of some help

in establishing context and "intent."

I have turned to the example of Scripture because I believe that what really motivates evangelicals who sympathize with Nisly's excursions against postmodernism is a fear of the instability, chaos, and anarchy in the Christian community which they think will result from the apparent loss of a stable text or "common work"-a work/text that has often been accorded supernatural divine status. I believe that such a fear, if it is indeed motivating the common evangelical exclusion of postmodern approaches from the Christian community, is ill-founded. No work, not even the Bible, is finally or essentially stable: this is a reality borne out in the history of biblical interpretation. This is a reality borne out in the fact that the divine text does not define "itself" in the same way for all those devout readers who sincerely commit themselves to understanding themselves and God in the context of its pages. This does not mean that the Bible does not enjoy a great measure of stability in communities that share interpretative assumptions and strategies: it does. But

Stanley Fish's observation about the text of Milton's Samson

Agonistes also applies to the biblical texts: they are

"stable in more than one direction, as a succession of

interpretive assumptions give [them] a succession of stable

shapes" (274).

One solution for the lack of a "common work" is present

in the example Nisly provides shortly after his confession

of hope in the meaningful "content" of words. He offers an

anecdote about a preacher who presumed to offer the

definitive interpretation of Jesus' parable about sewing the

new cloth on the old garment. Nisly remarks that the

preacher's interpretation "did not seem persuasive to me"

(115). This is essentially a postmodern moment for Nisly.

His use of the term "persuasive" reminds me of Stanley

Fish's distinction between demonstration and persuasion and

his argument that "all uses of language are interpretations

of reality" (243), and that since interpretive communities

authorize textual understanding, postmodern discourse will

be necessarily characterized by dialogue and persuasion, not

monologue and demonstration (demonstration is what

traditional, positivist epistemologies attempt to do). And

so even in Christian communities, we attempt to persuade

others to accept and believe our understanding of biblical

texts and God's purposes; demonstration can occur only in

the context of communally accepted and authorized boundaries

which are, in the larger picture, undeniably conventional.5

In other words, such "demonstration" is really persuasion in

the guise of "evidence." If you believe in the validity of

certain kinds of evidence and methods of demonstrating what

is "true," then such efforts can be used to persuade you.

   Thus it is the interpretative community that provides

stability and order, not the text or work. To look for such

stability and order from the text or work is to fool oneself

willingly. Often we do not realize this because many

interpretations and understandings lead long lives and begin

to appear as "self-evident" truths, and some interpretations

experience glorious resurrections after an ignominious death

at the hands of what has become for a new generation a

"less-enlightened" older generation of readers and

thinkers. To say this is also to recognize that the

interpretative community also provides the context for

challenges to stability and order established by certain

communal understandings of particular texts. New readings

and new uses of the "authoritative" text arise constantly.

A good example of this is the early Christian community's

new understanding and use of the Jewish Scriptures in

first-century Palestine.

In conclusion, while I affirm language as God's gift to

humanity, I do not believe language or "reality" has a

meaning which we discover or find, that is meaning that is

absolute, universal, objective, or inherent in the universe

we "find" ourselves in. The meanings that we do "discover,"

or feel that we "discover," are meanings created, shaped,

and decided by the numerous human communities that have

preceded our own. Human beings in community create, shape,

and decide the meaning of human experience and how that is

to be understood in the context of a communally authorized

understanding of God. I agree with Robert M. Grant's

contextualization of the New Testament texts:

[F]or it was the church in which and for which the

texts were written, by members of the church; it
was the church which preserved, selected, and
transmitted the texts. The central meaning or
cluster of meanings is therefore to be found
within the church's life and understandings,
broadly considered. (143)

When we always approach the Christian canon with rigid

assumptions about its unity, coherence, or "flatness" (that

is as a static work), we hazard missing the way in which the

texts in the biblical canon dialogue with one another,

providing a paradigm for the kind of sacred dialogue we

should be involved in and carrying on as Christians. The

differences in detail and purpose among the four Gospels

suggest the need for continuing dialogue about the meaning

of Jesus.

     At this point I would like to describe the big picture

of my understanding of human experience, the world, and God.

Unlike Calvin, I see the universe as an open universe. God

has not inscribed detailed meanings into material phenomena

or the experience of the "spiritual." God has not

determined the details of individual, national, or racial

histories. God has not encoded into the universe and human

experience a meaning which can only be discovered or found.

Instead, God has created an open universe where beings made

in God's image have the freedom to shape and reshape their

understanding of human experience. God has created an open

universe where all human decisions and uses of language have

meaning. God has infused God's infinite divinity into a

universe where God delights in the interpretative and

community-building activities of humans who have the genuine

capacity to surprise and delight God. This is not the

nihilism of Calvinism-sovereignty does not demand absolute

divine control and manipulation of the details of human

history and life. Sovereignty means God will use divine

power to finally redeem everything human.6

When I look at Donald Hettinga's struggle to continue

asserting an absolute reality even as his discussion of the

New Rhetoricians pulls him in the other direction, so that

he just as often speaks insights possible only in a

postmodern paradigm, I wonder why he wants to cling to an

absolutist epistemology and metaphysic that prefers evidence

to faith (75, 82).7 We are not called to prove or

demonstrate our Christian faith claims: yet

proof-demonstration-is the definitive function of an absolutist epistemology. We are called to confess our Christian faith and live and speak in a way that persuades others to embrace the Christian story and live in the context of the communally established authority we have forged for that story. This can be done in the framework of a relativist epistemology; in fact, I am doing just that.

Indeed, to echo Luther, I can do no other. Here I stand, so help me God. The truth of the postmodern epistemological and metaphysical paradigm I have used to critique the too common evangelical view of language and texts as represented by Paul Nisly's essay convicts me with all the force of any Holy spirit that convinced Luther of the truths of the nominalist philosophy that eventually shaped his understanding of St. Paul. I am committed to understanding God and human experience in the paradigm of the Christian story because the possibilities for responsible and ethical living in Christian community seem to me to be greatest. And it is the Christian community which authorizes the sacred texts-not the other way around.

And, finally, I have faith in God, a faith, as Sam Keen

would put it, that has "survived the death of many

beliefs."8 Echoing St. Paul, I say that my knowledge of

truth is partial; and I find myself trusting God's knowledge

of me, not my knowledge of God. And as a postmodern

Christian I affirm with St. Paul that "[m]eanwhile these

three remain: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of

these is love (1 Corinthians 13:13).

Notes

   1After discussing Paul Nisly's essay with him, I believe
it would be more accurate to say that I am offering a
critical response to the ways in which I suspect and
anticipate many of my conservative evangelical colleagues in
the Christian College Coalition will read (interpret)
Nisly's essay (in fact, the way I myself would have read
the essay five or six years ago). In my discussion with
Paul respecting this, I believe he realizes that his essay
will be read by many in the way I anticipate; even as author
he cannot control readers' interpretations of his writing.
(Although, unlike dead authors, he may respond, as I have
welcomed him to do to this critique.)
   2For more on this I recommend Jaroslav Pelikan's Jesus
Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture
(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985) and Robert M.
Grant and David Tracy's A Short History of the

Interpretation of the Bible, 2nd ed., revised and enlarged
(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).
   3Readers interested in hermeneutics will recognize by my
language that I owe a large debt to Stanley Fish's Is There

a Text in This Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980) both for the kind of language and the kind of theoretical structure that enables me to articulate both my criticism of one understanding of language and my own paradigm for Christian faith.

4I am deliberately playful here, for I suppose that Paul Nisley's meaning in a term like "behind" the text (and since we share a number of communities I am confident in going "behind" Nisly's text for understanding) is roughly similar to David Tracy's: "in the mind of the author, in the original social setting, in the original audience." Of course, Tracy's recognition of author, setting, and audience suggests that meaning "behind" a text is also negotiated. But I also agree with Tracy that "the primary meaning of the text does not lie 'behind' it nor even 'in' the text itself"; instead, "the meaning of the text lies in front of the text-in the now common question, the now common subject matter of both text and interpreter" (159). The relation between the words "common" and "community" make this realization particularly relevant to my emphasis on the community as the negotiator and authorizer of meaning.

5The idea of convention is very helpful for an understanding of my argument. Again, the context for my thinking can be found in Fish:

> I am not claiming that there are no facts; I am
> merely raising a question as to their status: do
> they exist outside conventions of discourse (which
> are then more or less faithful to them) or do they
> follow from the assumptions embodied in those same
> conventions? . . . What I have been suggesting is
> that identification (or specification of facts) is
> always within a story. Some stories, however, are
> more prestigious than others; and one story is
> always the standard one, the one that presents
> itself as uniquely true and is, in general, so
> accepted. Other, nonstandard, stories will of
> course continue to be told, but they will be
> regarded as nonfactual, when, in fact, they will
> only be nonauthorized. (237, 239)

6Some readers might recognize here my affinity with Mark S. McCleod's "multi-realist" epistemology as expressed in "Making God Dance: Postmodern Theorizing and the Christian College," Christian Scholar's Review 21.3 (March 1992): 275-92.

7"In the world we come to know there is the reality, the evidence of an all-powerful, all-loving God, a reality that is discernible through personal experience, but a reality that is not merely personal because it is accessible to all, or at least for all for whom the veil is removed" (Donald Hettinga, "Christians in the Worlds of Discourse," Faculty Dialogue 17 (Spring 1992): 75, my emphases). Hettinga's last clause, "for all for whom the veil is removed," deconstructs the preceding assertions, since such "knowledge" and discernment come only to those for whom the veil is removed, guaranteeing its "personal" nature and suggesting its capricious ways. There is also the difficulty in realizing that "evidence" is evidence only when it is interpreted or construed as such, and those of us who have lived through personal experiences that more clearly suggest the absence or powerlessness or carelessness of God will have some difficulty joining Hettinga in construing our experience to reflect the reality he is arguing for; for us there can only be faith and hope, without knowledge and evidence. In some cases, our faith and hope strains against the weight of countering knowledge and evidence: it is love alone (God is love) that sustains.

8Sam Keen, To a Dancing God (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1970), dedication page.