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It perhaps occurred to the editor with a satisfying irony that the first article in this dictionary-like compendium would be the one titled, “Anti-postmodernism.” And perhaps that irony could have been enhanced by giving it its more accurate title, anti-anti-postmodernism. Still it is a suitable starting point, for it sets up in the most general terms what is at stake in this approach: Does a text (in this case the biblical text) have a determinate meaning? And, I wonder, did the editor have to work to get the last essay to be on “truth”?

Between these two frames, there is an extensive collection of short articles (five to ten pages) on many of the important concepts and thinkers associated with postmodern literary criticism. Many of the essays in the volume are obvious, indeed indispensable, for such a collection: author, autobiography, culture criticism, deconstruction, ethics, fantasy, gender, ideology, politics, postcolonialism, and so on. Others treat some of the major voices (Derrida, Foucault, Jameson, Kristeva, and so on). Still others are not obvious (midrash, scholarship, space, translation, trauma). Are these postmodern topics or just topics treated by postmodern thinkers? Other topics are omitted without explanation (nothing on myth, meaning, discourse, or reading, for example). Moreover, the index, while extensive for authors mentioned, is weak on topics that are not central to these essays. Clearly not all relevant terms could be included, but many other terms are used in...
the various essays, and a better index would have been helpful. The strength of the index is its references to people, reflecting a strength of the essays in referring to both the founders and the current practitioners of postmodern criticism. There are many references to publications and an extensive bibliography to guide further reading.

The book is consciously aimed at a broad audience, from the neophyte to working scholar (viii–ix), but that does not work very well. The working scholar will find a lot that is repetitious and well known; the neophyte will find a lot that is obscure and esoteric. A more focused audience would have enhanced the book.

This is not to detract from the general excellence of the essays. I am perhaps one of those with middling experience of postmodernism. I have read a little theory and quite a lot of practice in the postmodern mode. For me the book was both a useful review of some of the basic issues and arguments and an opportunity to raise collateral issues to the level of conscious reflection (such as the relation of translation theory and the history of scholarship to postmodernism). In addition, specific essays, such as those on deconstruction, ethics, gender, historiography, ideology, politics, and postcolonialism, provide both succinct summaries and provocative extensions of these aspects of postmodern criticism.

The essay on gender is typical of the better essays in the book. It begins with the contrast between a modernist construction of gender (as innate social traits arising naturally from biological sex) and a postmodernist construction (as a socially constructed set of behaviors with deep political roots). It probes both sides of this essentialist versus constructionist debate, tracing some of the key turning points in scholarly analysis, most especially the notion that gender depends as much on social location as on biology. It then raises the political question: If there is no universal category of “women,” is common political action possible?

The author then traces three ways postmodern scholars have attempted to overcome this impasse, citing the relevant studies. The essay concludes by examining the degree to which gender is determined by performance—a doing, not a being. This opens up the possibility of overcoming the simple dichotomy between male and female (and thus reveals the heterosexual bias of most gender discussions). That dichotomy itself is a relatively recent invention, growing out of the political necessity to find new grounds for female inferiority after the Enlightenment undermined the traditional hierarchical view grounded in divine revelation. “From a postmodern perspective, sex and gender are both cultural fictions” (105).

What is useful here, and in many other essays, is the clear distinction between modernist and postmodernist perspectives, a careful tracing of the intellectual tradition showing the interaction of various points of view, an exposition of the postmodernist reading, and the
drawing of important implications. It provides both a summary of the topic and a basis for further reading and discussion.

Of course, postmodernism is itself a diverse tradition, and we should not expect to find unanimity here. There is diversity but very little dialogue between participants. But then, this is a handbook, and a very useful one, not a book to be read.