



## Ricoeur's Theological Hermeneutics: 'Impure' Narrativism and the Possibility of Truth

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### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to critically assess the extent to which Ricoeur's theological hermeneutics can justifiably be situated within the tradition of narrative theology. It will be contended that his method of biblical interpretation transcends the analytical categories deployed by narrativists in organising and promoting their competing understandings of theological hermeneutics. To this end, there will be a treatment of Ricoeur's intellectual antecedents, in particular, Karl Barth. It will be argued that Ricoeur's concern for the primacy of biblical revelation in theological inquiry evinces a Barthian reverence for the primordial theological principle of *logos*. Allied to this will be an analysis of Ricoeur's efforts to maintain a distinction between theological and philosophical hermeneutics. It will be demonstrated that, whilst they need not (indeed ought not) be considered mutually exclusive, Ricoeur resists the temptation to regionalise his theological hermeneutical method within a more general philosophical interpretative scheme. In light of this, it will be contended that his method admits of sufficient theo- and logo-centricity as to preserve, from the excesses of experiential-expressivism, the unique subject-matter of the Bible. Insofar as Ricoeur's interpretive and explicative method concerns itself with the external history of theology and its epistemic and hermeneutical implications, it will be argued that it does so in a way consistent with narrative theology's legitimate concern to tell 'the whole story'<sup>1</sup> and thereby avoids the fidiestic potential of a purely cultural-linguistic method of re-description. It will be further argued that this 'impure' hermeneutical method correctly concedes to the ambit of theological inquiry foundational, epistemic concerns which,

<sup>1</sup> Comstock, 'Telling the Whole Story? American Narrative Theology after H. Richard Niebuhr' in *Religion and Philosophy in the United States of America*, Peter Freese (Ed.) (Essen, Verlag Die Blaue Eule, 1987), pp. 125–152.

if engaged with positively, have the potential to render faith-based truth-claims rationally defensible to the secular world.

### Ricoeur: a second-generation Barthian

Throughout his career, Ricoeur was consistent in arguing for the separation of theological and philosophical inquiry. His concern that they remain separate (though mutually enriching) disciplines is expressed succinctly when, in answer to the question 'Would you accept being introduced as a 'Protestant philosopher'?', he responded 'Certainly not. But 'philosopher and Protestant', yes!'<sup>2</sup> The theological reason for Ricoeur's strict observance of this separation can be traced, Sohn argues, to his Reformed tradition and the critical retrieval of Barthian theology in particular.<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur's intellectual milieu was heavily influenced by Barth's French disciples Maury and Visser't Hooft for whom the primacy of the Word of God was fundamental and the concern to save theological inquiry from crypto-philosophy critical. Unlike Maury, however, Ricoeur was more a second-generation Barthian who, like his contemporary Mehl, sought to move beyond the phase of crisis and rupture towards a positive engagement with philosophy and culture. Importantly, though, Ricoeur eschews the Schleiermacher-inspired liberal (mis)appropriation of theology as a universal science with its 'built up and built in presuppositions of historical understanding and research.'<sup>4</sup> Instead, he prefers Barth's positing of the theological problem: '[t]he origin of faith lies in the solicitation of man by the object of faith.'<sup>5</sup> The central task of theology is not, then, to answer the anthropological or epistemological question as to whether human knowledge of revelation is possible. Nor is it to seek after authorial intent as do the proponents of the historical-critical method. Rather, theology consists in, and derives its inquisitorial ambit from, the response to the Word of God spoken to this or that person within the believing community. It is within the world of the biblical text – not the Bible's *Sitz im Leben* uncovered by biblical criticism, but its *Sitz im Wort* that confronts the listener

<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur, 'Paul Ricoeur: la foi du philosophe', *Le Christianisme au XXème Siècle* No.697 (11–24 July, 1999), p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Sohn, 'Paul Ricoeur and the Renewal of Christian Tradition', *Religion and Ethics Workshop*, University of Chicago Divinity School, 29 March, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* See also Sohn, 'Paul Tillich and Paul Ricoeur on the Meaning of 'Philosophical Theology'', *Bulletin of North American Paul Tillich Society*, Vol. 12, No. 24 (2013).

<sup>5</sup> 'L'origine de la foi est dans la sollicitation de l'homme par l'objet de la foi.' Ricoeur, *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Freud* (Paris, éditions du Seuil, 1965), p. 504. Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, Savage (Trans.) (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1970), p. 523.

as the reliable Word of God – that the text speaks for itself 'without external impositions and presuppositions.'<sup>6</sup>

### The regionalised hermeneutic and the principle of inversion

In light of this Barthian reverence for the Word, it should be clear that Ricoeur seeks not to achieve his ambition to overcome the antimony between Christianity's internal and external histories by regionalising his theological hermeneutics into a wider philosophical interpretive scheme. Engagement with theology's counter-disciplines as necessary conversation partners, need not (and ought not) lead to the subordination of theology as a derivative within a wider philosophical metanarrative. Ricoeur concedes that '[i]n one sense theological hermeneutics appears as a particular case of philosophical hermeneutics, to the extent that it contains the major categories of the latter: discourse, writing, explanation, interpretation, distanciation, appropriation, etc.'<sup>7</sup> When, however, he applies the concepts and categories of general hermeneutics to biblical interpretation, the distinctly theological and *revealed* nature of its referents is disclosed and so the *prima facie* subordination of theology to philosophy is inverted.<sup>8</sup> This is particularly evident in Ricoeur's discernment of form within biblical narrative and wider discourse, a process he calls 'the art of identifying the discourse within the work.'<sup>9</sup> This process develops original traits within biblical exegesis which are affirmed 'when we pass from the 'structures of the text' to the 'world of the text.' The linguistic thrust from the 'about' of the text to its 'about what' creates a new linguistic world where the Bible's proverbs, eschatological sayings and parables reach the limits of language such that the interpreter can acknowledge it to be language of a genuinely religious character. Take, for example, the inseparability or 'indissoluble solidarity' between the 'confession of faith' and the forms of discourse in which it arises: '[n]ot only does each form of discourse give rise to a style of confession of faith, but also the confrontation of these forms of discourse gives rise, in the confession of faith itself, to tensions and contrasts which are theologically significant.'<sup>10</sup> When read in the

<sup>6</sup> Sohn, 'Paul Ricoeur and the Renewal of Christian Tradition', *art. cit.* See also Wallace, 'The World of the Text: Theological Hermeneutics in the Thought of Karl Barth and Paul Ricoeur', *Union Seminary Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (1986), pp. 1–15, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Ricoeur, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics', *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* Vol. 5, No.1 (1975), p.14.

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics,' in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, Blamey and Thompson (Trans.) (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2007), p. 90.

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics', *art. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

light of the primitive creed in Deuteronomy 26, the narrative form yields 'something specific, something unique, [...] about Yahweh and about his relations with his people, Israel, because it is said in a narrative form, in the form of a story which recounts the events of deliverance in the past.'<sup>11</sup> Approving Von Rad's method of correlation between form of discourse and theological content, Ricoeur reiterates the eccentricity of revelation: '[n]ot just any theology whatever can be tied to the narrative form, but only a theology which proclaims Yahweh to be the grand Actor in a history of deliverance.'<sup>12</sup> Narrative, along with prophecy and other forms of discourse are together correlates which form a circular system with the content of each receiving 'its signification from the total constellation of forms of discourse.'<sup>13</sup>

Wallace observes that Ricoeur appeals to general hermeneutical categories 'only insofar as they are dialectically related to, and not in control of, actual exegetical practice.' Accordingly, 'hermeneutical theory *guides* our understanding of the text while the text's unique referents of ultimacy (i.e. God, Jesus, Kingdom of God, and so on) *govern* our understanding of the Bible's meaning.'<sup>14</sup> The eccentricity of theology's unique referents of ultimacy both intensify and transgress the general categories and concepts of hermeneutics so that the interpreter can be said to interpret through, with and in the Word. If, in this way, Ricoeur's hermeneutic is governed by theology and only guided by philosophy – the latter becoming the former's 'organon' – this is due in no small part to his retention of the primordial theological principle of *logos* or parole as the governing referent. It is this Barthian logocentricity which avoids the subordination of theological inquiry to an extrabiblical, non-revelatory sphere of reference: '[i]f the believer speaks of God, it is because he speaks first of the Word of God.'<sup>15</sup> Importantly, though, his hermeneutic does not preclude theology from operating within such a sphere of reference provided theology understands herself to be guided rather than governed by its referents. For Ricoeur, God-speak is inextricably though irreducibly linked to language, myth and symbol. It follows that what he seeks to achieve is not so much a first-order hermeneutics *of* the text, but rather a second-order hermeneutics *based on* the problematics of the text and in so doing articulates something of the art

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1990), p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Ricoeur, 'La critique de la religion', *Bulletin du Centre Protestant d'Etudes* Nos. 4–5 (June, 1964), p. 5.

of understanding involved in the interpretative act.<sup>16</sup> His enterprise, then, is not that of the 'pure' cultural-linguist who seeks merely to re-describe the first-order Christian assertions derived from the plain, literal and normative reading of the Bible. Instead, Ricoeur's is an explicative task which engages, within a conceptual framework, the question of appropriated understanding. Importantly, the logocentricity of his method means that his second-order *quaestio* is preceded by a first-order *lectio* and thereby circumscribes the risk of displacing the Bible's otherness.

### Frei and the inseparability of meaning and reference

Frei, whose theology has come to epitomise what his disciple Lindbeck has described as the 'cultural-linguistic' model of narrativism, argues that the very bifurcation of meaning and reference implicit within Ricoeur's hermeneutic is unjustified within a purely narrativial framework.<sup>17</sup> Why? Because it opens up a world between meaning and reference where, by appeal to hermeneutical categories, philosopher-kings can subordinate and displace the Bible's unique subject-matter in order to ensure its congruence with 'the elaborate synthesizing requirements of a more general, explanatory theory.'<sup>18</sup> To speak of the realistic narrative is to admit of no such world. Indeed, the realistic narrative enjoys a privileged position over philosophical, social scientific, historical, and poetic discourse. To construe it, as Ricoeur does, as independent from though dialectically related to other narrative forms is potentially to empty of all meaning and content the principle of semantic autonomy. This potentiality, when realised, is symptomatic of the generalising tendencies of an explanatory scheme. For Frei, scripture 'simultaneously depicts and renders the reality (if any) of what it talks about'; the text's subject matter is wedded to, indeed constitutive of, its narrative form.<sup>19</sup> To perpetuate the purported dichotomy between meaning and reference is to subject the centrality and authority of the Gospel's form to the embarrassments already levelled at the literalistic reading of fundamentalism, the mythological interpretation of Strauss and the rationalistic interpretation of Kant. Yet it is clear from Ricoeur's articulation of the

<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics', *art. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> Frei, 'The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch of Will It Break?' in *The Bible and the Narrative Tradition*, McConnell (Ed.) (New York, Oxford University Press, 1986); Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1984).

<sup>18</sup> Frei, *ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>19</sup> Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 27, 33.

textual unit or work resultant from the speech-writing process, that his hermeneutic is not inconsistent with Frei's more modest descriptive endeavour. They at least appear to arrive at the same result, the eccentricity of revelation. What separates them, of course, is the journey they each make. For Frei, Ricoeur's 'high-powered' hermeneutic forces the exegete to cross an unnecessary bridge between meaning and reference only to arrive at 'the world of the text' where the Gospel runs the real risk (for Frei) of becoming 'the text of the world.' To this 'world' we will later return.

The difficulty for the cultural-linguist is that, as van Huyssteen points out, 'biblical narratives are already interpretations, and biblical concepts in themselves are mini-theories that reveal the way in which the classic text of the Bible was received and interpreted through the ages.'<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur makes the point well in his treatment of Exodus 3:14 where the 'quasi obsessive distrust of exegetes,' suspicious of ontotheology's speculative abstractions, is exposed to be misplaced and born of an ahistorical naiveté:

[T]hat [which is] criticisable [is] the naïve claim of an exegesis that held itself to be without a history, as though it were possible to coincide, without the mediation of a tradition of reading, with the original signification of a text, even with the presumed intention of its author.<sup>21</sup>

The convergence of Philo, pagan theologians and the Johanne school informed the translative choices of the Septuagint such that it can be said to be 'a veritable event in thinking' which has 'contributed to the intellectual and spiritual identity of the Christian West.'<sup>22</sup> To seek to unknot the bonds woven from this convergence is to deny the truth that there is 'no innocent translation.' As Ricoeur observes, '[t]o translate is already to interpret'<sup>23</sup> to which Soskice would no doubt add, and 'to narrate is to explain.'<sup>24</sup> That such an 'event in thinking' happens within a temporally and spatially constituted context speaks to the universal experience of historicity. To preclude, as the cultural-linguist would, a second-order, explicative engagement with how the meaning of Christianity's first-order assertions come to be understood and appropriated as true, could be perceived as a misplaced, fideistic want of confidence in faith's ability to withstand the

<sup>20</sup> Van Huyssteen, 'Narrative theology: An adequate paradigm for theological reflection?', HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies; Vol. 45, No. 4 (1989), pp. 767–777, p. 771.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur and La Cocque, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, Pellauer (Ed.) (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 332.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 332.

<sup>24</sup> Soskice, 'Myths, metaphors and narrative theology' in *Proceedings: 7<sup>th</sup> European Conference on Philosophy of Religion* (Utrecht University, 1988), p. 130. See also Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985).

generalising and reductive tendencies associated with a theoretical shift from description to explanation. Yet such a shift is legitimate within a purely narrativ framework if, as it must, narrative is to 'tell the whole story.'

### The speech-writing process and Revelation as kerygma

That there exists a (hermeneutic) relation between writing and speaking is foundational for Ricoeur and yields for him the principle of semantic autonomy which he defines as the 'liberation of the written subject matter from the dialogical condition of discourse.'<sup>25</sup> Within the genuine constitution of the text as writing, distanciation is implied. The text enjoys its own referential integrity independent of the discursive conditions which render its coming into existence. *Verfremdung* must not only be overcome by understanding but is itself 'a condition for and a mediation in understanding.'<sup>26</sup> The relationship between objectification and interpretation need not be interpreted 'as dichotomous, as the romantic tradition has viewed it, but as complementary.'<sup>27</sup> By extension, the dichotomy between objective reading and subjective appropriation is replaced in 'the same seamless event of reading' with an understanding from both angles simultaneously.<sup>28</sup> What might be the significance for theological hermeneutics of this relation between speaking and writing? Ricoeur answers that,

[a]bove all theological hermeneutics receives from philosophical hermeneutics an early warning, a warning not to be too quick to construct a theology of the Word which does not include initially and in principle the passage from speech to writing.<sup>29</sup>

The kerygmatic nature of Christian revelation places at the origin of the problem of interpretation the speech-writing relationship and legitimates the interpretative act. The very engagement with subjective appropriated understanding (and its connect with revelation's objective meaning) which the cultural-linguist would wish to excise from biblical interpretation is an inextricable part of the Christian narrative and its genesis. Ricoeur observes, by way of example, that what exegeses refer to as Christological titles are themselves reinterpretations of figures from Hebraic and Hellenistic cultures. This leads him to

<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics', *art. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching*, (Waco, Baylor University Press, 2013), p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics', *art. cit.*, p. 19.

the conclusion that 'writing must precede speaking, if that speaking is not to remain only a cry.'<sup>30</sup> It is the text, itself the product of an interpretative or exegetical act which gathers from distention man's cries into intelligible speech, which is the guarantor of future speech. Preaching within the community is itself founded upon the interpreted testimony of witnesses and it is tradition which operates as the historically constituted custodian of this speech-writing process. It can be said, therefore, that 'the speech-writing relationship is constitutive of what we call proclamation, kerygma, preaching':

The very newness of the event requires that it be transmitted by means of an interpretation of the preliminary signs – already written down – and available within the cultural community. In this sense Christianity is from its very beginning an exegesis.<sup>31</sup>

Ricoeur further opines that not only is the resultant text a written discourse, but it is a discourse which takes the form of a *work*, exhibiting characteristics such as composition, compliance to genres and individuality of style. As such, the interpretative act must be attentive to both *praxis* and *techne* for the work is the product of intellectual and manual endeavour. That it is a product implies that it is preceded by a process of production and that the resultant product, by virtue of its being a product, possesses a level of objectification.

### **Revelation within an historically predicated tradition: the imperative of interpretation**

To conceptualise the process of production, Ricoeur calls in aid Gerhard Ebeling for whom the Word of God is not merely mediated in Scripture but also transmediated in history and tradition.<sup>32</sup> History is the predicate of the interpretative act within the process of the word. The objectified discourse within the structured work, when coupled with the distantiation associated with writing, collapses for Ricoeur the opposition, originating with Dilthey, between understanding and explanation. Indeed, explanation becomes for him the unavoidable road to understanding since explanation can no longer be considered proper to the natural sciences but rather 'provided by the

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, 'Ebeling', *Foi et éducation* No.78 (January-March, 1967), p. 43. Ricoeur relies on Ebeling's collection of essays entitled *Word and Faith*. See Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, Leitch (Trans.) (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1963). Ricoeur translates Ebeling's term *Wortgeschehen* into French as *le procès de la parole*. See further Sohn, 'Paul Ricoeur and the Renewal of Christian Tradition', *art. cit.*



very science of language itself.'<sup>33</sup> In this light, narrative interpretation and theology more generally are inherently explicative disciplines and so exhibit a concern for interpretation beyond the meaning which literary criticism or grammar might yield. Here, Ricoeur dares to enter into and prise open what for the pure theological-exegete is the hermetically sealed and intrasystematic language-game between the believed-in text and believing community. He does so convinced that narrative is neither pure nor autonomous, nor indeed deserving of unique theological status. Rather, God chooses to reveal God's self in time and space and so, as Comstock observes, Christian sacred narratives 'are irreducibly infected with historical, philosophical, and psychological concerns.'<sup>34</sup> For the theologian or exegete or believing community to seek after an antiseptically sterile Archimedean plane from which to grasp the grammatical rules and concepts of its texts and practices betrays a need for intellectual conversion. The exegete, even one wedded to the *sensus literalis*, inhabits a divinely-created order where matter matters and so, even before the beginning of inquiry, their efforts at understanding and clarification have to be conducted from a position of prior engagement: '[e]veryone speaks from some place, and all claims to universality are raised from a privileged position.'<sup>35</sup> The Word Incarnate revealed in Sacred Scripture and transmuted within a temporally and spatially constituted (though not limited) tradition necessitates the adoption of an *ad extra* perspective which conceives of an inevitable and mutually enriching interplay between *lectio* and *quaestio*. Thus understood, tradition is more akin to an historically conditioned transmediative process, 'embodied in institutions', where its 'core-deposit is gradually illuminated further over time' than as mere transmitter of dogma whose knowledge and understanding is already fully achieved.<sup>36</sup> If, as Ricoeur believes, the myths and symbols of the biblical narrative 'give rise to thought' and are generative of a poetic imagination, this gives impetus to a conversation between theology and its counter-disciplines, a conversation which is at once illuminating and corrective, putting conversants at risk of conversion from the reductivist excesses of their fundamentalist or liberal positions.

<sup>33</sup> Ricoeur, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics', *art. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>34</sup> Comstock, 'Two Types of Narrative Theology', *art. cit.*, p. 688.

<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics', *art. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> Rist, 'On the Very Idea of Translating Sacred Scripture' in *The Interpretation of the Bible: The International Symposium in Slovenia*, Krasovec (Ed.) (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp. 1499–1511, p. 1507.

### The narrative schism: the Christ-referent in 'the world of the text'

It is within what Ricoeur calls the 'world of the text' that rupture between the purists from New Haven and the impurists from Chicago is most pronounced. It is here that Ricoeur's hermeneutical scheme of meaning and understanding reaches its experiential-expressive zenith<sup>37</sup> and betrays, what for purists, are liberal excesses and their potential for reductivist interpretations of biblical narratives. For Ricoeur, the sustaining interplay between polyphonic language and the circularity of the forms finds explicative force within this world of text-being. Here, he eschews the suppression or abandonment of the referential function of language encountered in the broader genres of fictional narrative and poetry, believing that '[i]n spite of [literature's] inwardly directed use of language no discourse is so introverted that it no longer addresses itself at all to reality.'<sup>38</sup> He acknowledges that a suspension of first-order reference in descriptive, confirmative and didactic forms of discourse is itself 'the condition of the possibility for yielding a second-order reference.'<sup>39</sup> If it was otherwise, and the referential function of language was suspended (or abandoned) entirely, what would be left to interpretation? It is on this second-order plane that reference 'no longer touches the world at the level of manipulable objects, but at the deeper level,' a level best described as Husserlian *Lebenswelt* or Heideggerian *in der Welt-Sein*.<sup>40</sup> It is within this 'world of the text' that metaphor finds a privileged place. Only metaphorical language and its inherent capacity for the mimesis of reality can be generative of the 'imaginative variations' necessary to redescribe the metamorphosis which everyday reality undergoes in its mutually constitutive encounter with language in its myriad forms. This 'world of the text,' in the context of biblical hermeneutics, opens up a global horizon, of a totality of meanings between structural explanation and self-understanding on which 'the self of the reader' is formed and transformed according to the text's intention.<sup>41</sup>

It must be remembered that the unfolding of this 'world of the text,' a world which is at once cosmic, communitarian, historical, cultural and personal, does not necessitate or licence the premature introduction of 'existential categories of understanding to counter

<sup>37</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, op. cit., p. 136.

<sup>38</sup> Ricoeur, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics', *art. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24–29.

balance the eventual excesses of structural analysis.<sup>42</sup> On the contrary, and consistent with the Ricoeurian principle of hermeneutic inversion, it discloses this 'world of the text' to be 'a new world, a new covenant, the Kingdom of God, a new birth.'<sup>43</sup> For Ricoeur, observance of this principle of inversion, guarantees the primacy of the text and the specificity of its revelatory nature preserves it from 'an insufflation of meaning by an author who projects himself into the text.'<sup>44</sup> He seeks, then, to offer a thoroughly theocentric hermeneutic where the 'God-referent is at once the coordinator of [the Bible's] varied discourses and the index of their incompleteness, the point at which something escapes them.'<sup>45</sup> The gravitational force of the God-referent gathers together 'all the significations which issue from the partial discourses, and [opens] up a horizon which escapes from the closure of the discourse.'<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the Christ-referent incarnates 'all the religious significations in a fundamental symbol, the symbol of a sacrificial love, of a love stronger than death.'<sup>47</sup>

### A bridge too far: Christ as illustrative archetype

For Frei though, Ricoeur's hermeneutical interplay of objective meaning and subjective understanding, between 'the world of the text' and 'the self of the reader', when taken to its logical conclusion, requires that, like anyone else,

Jesus is here not in the first place the agent of his actions nor the enacted project(s) that constitute(s) him, nor the person to whom the actions of others happen; he is, rather, the verbal expressor of a certain preconceptual consciousness which he then, in a logically derivative or secondary sense, exhibits in action.<sup>48</sup>

Critiquing Tracy, a theologian whose hermeneutics exhibit a 'close reading and precise regional application of Ricoeur's general hermeneutics,' Frei disputes the Ricoeurian claim to hermeneutical inversion if Jesus cannot be preserved from being reduced to a mere illustrative archetype, 'a temporary personal thickening' of

<sup>42</sup> Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 1995), pp. 43–44.

<sup>43</sup> Ricoeur, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics', *art. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Frei, 'The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch of Will It Break?', *art. cit.*, p. 46.

some 'dispositional attitude' or universal experience of the interpreting subject.<sup>49</sup>

This suspicion is confirmed somewhat when Ricoeur, in his *Semeia* essay, declares:

In this sense we must say that the ultimate referent of the parables, proverbs, and eschatological sayings is not the Kingdom of God, but human reality in its whole-ness... Religious language discloses the religious dimension of *common* human experience.<sup>50</sup>

This is perhaps the juncture at which Ricoeur's hermeneutic informed by what Frei describes as a 'phenomenology of consciousness' brings into relief the underlying schism between narrativists.<sup>51</sup> For the 'pure' cultural-linguist, Ricoeur's 'world of the text' has the potential to invert the theological hierarchy so that the *verbum externum* of religion is reduced to a subordinate or derivative of the *verbum internum* understood in experiential-expressivist terms as 'a common experience diversely articulated in different religions.'<sup>52</sup> If, however, we understand Ricoeur to be engaged in the 'inherently reductionistic' second-order interpretive and explicative enterprise concerned with the mediation of meaning and its appropriated understanding, can he be condemned for not offering a normative, non-figurative representation of who Christ is in all his specificity?<sup>53</sup> Is his concern not to explain the *modus significandi* rather than describe the *res significandi*? As Comstock argues:

[D]escriptions must be close to the first order language of religious texts and practices. Explanations need not be [...] [P]urists have not shown that all such explanations are inappropriate. Simply labelling them 'reductionistic' will not do, because 'reduction' is precisely what explanations are supposed to do.<sup>54</sup>

His *Semeia* comments and earlier treatment of the parables notwithstanding, Ricoeur's method undergoes some maturation such that in the end, it can be said to be one which 'respects and remains open to the otherness of the particular realities to which the biblical narratives bear witness.'<sup>55</sup> It follows that the cultural-linguist must consider the

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>50</sup> Ricoeur, 'Biblical Hermeneutics', *Semeia* 4 (1975), pp. 127–128.

<sup>51</sup> Frei, 'The Literal Reading of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does it Stretch of Will It Break?', *art. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>52</sup> Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>53</sup> Comstock, 'Two Types of Narrative Theology', *art. cit.*, p. 699.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 710.

<sup>55</sup> Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching*, (Waco, Baylor University Press, 2013), p. 112. Pape notes how Ricoeur, in 'Bible and Imagination', would go on to recognise the parables as

charge of bifurcating objective meaning and subjective understanding levelled at Ricoeur's hermeneutical method to have been somewhat premature. For Ricoeur, meaning and understanding are 'simply two moments of the seamless event of reading' in which the 'projected world that is the referent of biblical narrative must be understood from both angles simultaneously.'<sup>56</sup> In this light, Pape's observation has some merit:

Frei and most of his Yale allies are suspicious of Ricoeur because he simply does not fit neatly into any of the analytical categories they deploy in organising and promoting their understanding of theological hermeneutics.<sup>57</sup>

### **'Impure' narrativism and the possibility of truth**

Whether or not the foregoing analysis suffices to defend Ricoeur's theological hermeneutic as faithful to the postulates of narrativism ultimately depends on a value-judgment being made by the would-be-theologian as to the legitimate scope of theological inquiry and the place of biblical narrative within such. No theologian can ignore, it is submitted, the epistemological problem of determining criteria for the assessment of faith-based truth claims and their cognitive status. Nor can they eschew adherence to hermeneutical criteria for the proper distinguishing of good from bad receptions of Christianity's classic text and their necessity for assessing the validity of their differing interpretations. To do as the cultural-linguists, and pull up the drawbridge to preserve the biblical narrative and the truths derived therefrom in a fortified edifice smacks of a retreat into dogmatic and fideistic isolationism which holds out the very real potential for the relativizing of religious truth in a pre-critical, pre-interpretative and ultimately groundless language-game. Explanation is collapsed into description, with all roads for justification leading to 'the impenetrable authority of the ecclesial reading community.'<sup>58</sup> If the only claim to truth which a believer can make is founded on the witness-value of the pious praxis of the believing community observant of the Bible's 'rule of life' – and even then only to be analysed in an internal, ad hoc, pragmatic manner – what becomes of the Bible's unique subject-matter in a world inhabited by communities of non-Christian

'narratives recounted by the principal personage within an all-encompassing narrative' and so deserving of a more nuanced, narratively 'pure' interpretation than *Semeia* might yield.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>58</sup> Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

adherents who admit of similar pious praxis?<sup>59</sup> Is the interpretation of the social-scientist or ethnographer to be prized over that of the hermeneut or epistemologist? If it be so, it is submitted that the truth of faith cannot hope to penetrate the extratextual world of human experience. This world is one which is intersected by many communities and many narratives which must be negotiated by even those who take the Bible seriously.<sup>60</sup> As Comstock observes:

I do not think that we can have it both ways; either we are making truth claims or we are not. If we are not, then we must be content to have others say about us: 'Oh, the Jesus narrative again; that's just their story about things.' If we are – if we think that in an important sense this story is a true story about things – then we must accept responsibility for showing not only *how* one ought to understand the claim, but *why* it should be affirmed.<sup>61</sup>

The better view is that of Ricoeur who, in daring to cross the bridge into 'the world of the text,' ventures to tell the whole story, not only the internal history of Christian self-description, but also the external history as perceived by the observer. His theological hermeneutics offer a vehicle for positive, intelligible engagement with theology's counter-disciplines and avoids theology's inevitable encounter with culture resembling the chicken talking to the duck. To consign to the historical scrapheap theology's age-old pursuit of *fides quaerens intellectum* (and the engagement with epistemic and hermeneutical questions attendant thereon) is to concede to the hyperbolic doubt of postmodernist scepticism the central role of reason and rational thought. This can only lead to the ultimate silencing of any God-speak capable of explaining and justifying why the Jesus Christ of the biblical narrative is worthy of allegiance and generative of praxis. To consciously bracket the question of truth and validity, as pure narrativism does, can only be seen as 'a kind of sectarian instrumentalism' where a meaningful Christian story is achieved at the cost of detaching this story from an apologetic dialogue with other Christians and with the secular world.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> For an understanding of the cultural-linguists' approach to the validation of faith's truth-claims, see generally Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992).

<sup>60</sup> Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching*, *op. cit.*

<sup>61</sup> Comstock, 'Truth or Meaning: Ricoeur versus Frei on Biblical Narrative', *Journal of Religion*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (1986), p. 131.

<sup>62</sup> Van Huyssteen, 'Narrative theology: An adequate paradigm for theological reflection?', *art. cit.*, p. 773.

## Critical realism and the fallible enterprise of justification

To give rationally defensible reasons for belief is not to admit of the grandiose pretensions of classicism's universalist philosophising, nor is it to confine rationality to the narrow ambit of modernity's theoretical and cognitivist definition. Rather, it is to include the evaluative and pragmatic dimensions of knowledge with the cognitive. Only this can hold out the promise of retrieving in our postmodern age, the public nature of theology which modernity had previously relegated 'to the subjective sphere of non-rational, interior, private experience.'<sup>63</sup> If a 'new Reformation' is necessary, it is not one which seeks to free Scripture from 'the papacy of the scholar'<sup>64</sup> but rather one which puts at the core of a retrieved and reconfigured public theology the capacity to engage in a moderate form of critical realism.<sup>65</sup> This '[f]allible, feeble, finite, tentative, revisable'<sup>66</sup> enterprise seems congenial with the decentred, humiliated self of the regnant culture, and with its theological correlate, what Ricoeur calls 'the biblical self of the prophetic tradition': the 'non-egoistic, non-narcissistic, non-imperialistic mode of subjectivity which responds and corresponds to the power of a work to display a *world*.'<sup>67</sup> It recognises, in a manner which prizes critical accountability and pragmatic coherence, the epistemic value of the biblical and wider faith narrative and the hermeneutical implications of their inherent metaphoricity. Only when we recognise our dependence on extended concepts such as analogy and metaphor (themselves arising out of the Bible's narrative and other discursive forms) as the necessary precondition to say anything intelligible and meaningful about God, are we permitted to ask that important and final question: 'do we have good enough reasons to believe that these extended concepts are managing to do what we think they are doing,

<sup>63</sup> Scanlan, 'The Humiliated Self as the Rhetorical Self' in Caputo, Doolan and Scanlan (Eds.), *Questioning God* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 263–273, p. 265.

<sup>64</sup> Wiles, 'Scriptural authority and theological construction: The limitations of narrative' in Green (Ed.), *Scriptural authority and narrative* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1987), quoted in Van Huyssteen, 'Narrative theology: An adequate paradigm for theological reflection?', *art. cit.*, p. 771.

<sup>65</sup> Brümmer argues that 'religious faith entails some form of critical realism regarding the ontological status of religious models or 'pictures'' and believes that a Wittgensteinian language-game theory, if founded on *factual* belief more broadly conceived than DZ Philips' 'old-fashioned [empirical] verificationist definition' could aid this. If correct, his theory could facilitate an 'impure' narrativist reappropriation of Wittgenstein contra his fideist interpreters. Brümmer, 'Wittgenstein and the Irrationality of Rational Theology' in *The Christian Understanding of God Today*, Byrne (Ed.) (Dublin, Columba Press, 1983), pp. 88–102, pp. 97; 96.

<sup>66</sup> Scanlan, 'The Humiliated Self as the Rhetorical Self', *art. cit.*, p. 272.

<sup>67</sup> Ricoeur, 'Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theological Hermeneutics', *art. cit.*, p. 30.

that is managing to refer, to 'get hold of reality?'<sup>68</sup> It seems that this form of critical realism, which has due regard for the epistemic and hermeneutical implications of the unavoidably interpretative and explicative nature of exegetical and theological discourse, is capable of addressing in an adequately context-relevant manner, Christianity's 'concern to show that God acts in the human world and its history.'<sup>69</sup>

### Conclusion

In the final analysis, it should be clear that this would-be-theologian has made that necessary value-judgment as to the legitimate scope of theological inquiry in favour of Ricoeur's 'impure' narrativism. It is submitted that Ricoeur's hermeneutical method is a theologically sound and rationally defensible guarantor of faith-based truth claims. Ricoeur evidences a Barthian reverence for the primacy of the Word and, through his consistent reliance on the principle of inversion, faithfully observes the distinction between theology on the one hand, and philosophy and her counter-disciplines on the other. He offers a Christocentric and narrativist interpretative aid to biblical exegesis and theological inquiry which is cognisant of the linguistic turn in extra-biblical thought. His attentiveness to the speech-writing relationship and its translative consequences, the text as work and the interplay of meaning and reference within 'the world of the text,' together evidence his conviction that 'the quest to understand human existence must be mediated by language, symbol, and story.'<sup>70</sup> Ricoeur's situating of his method within an explicative theological enterprise ensures a positive engagement with the epistemic and hermeneutical concerns of a theology which must, in the end, regard reason and rationality as friend rather than foe. To conceive of theology's inquisitorial ambit as bound by the parameters laid down by purists is likely to have the theologian build walls rather than bridges and thereby to concede any hope of retrieving a public theology capable of intelligible God-speak in our postmodern age.

<sup>68</sup> Van Huyssteen, 'Narrative theology: An adequate paradigm for theological reflection?', *art. cit.*, p. 776.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.



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