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Poetical Postmodern Exegesis: Paul Ricoeur and Olivier-Thomas Venard in Dialogue

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Abstract: In a postmodern linguistic turn, Paul Ricoeur pays great attention to the subject and the Biblical text itself. This helpfully presents a very pristine text, one which can move and re-create the subject who encounters the text with humility. However, when it comes to Biblical exegesis specifically, Ricoeur's method is immanentist, ahistorical, and unhelpfully rejects any interpretive authority. Olivier-Thomas Venard, like Ricoeur, pays great attention to the sign-character of the Bible's language, but offers a more holistic exegesis which takes the Bible on its own terms and is metaphysically and historically grounded. In this article, I first lay out Ricoeur's poetical exegetical project and offer interpretive and metaphysical critiques; specifically, I contend that his "distanciated" reading of the Bible and his rejection of authority fail to interpret the Bible on its own terms. I then turn to Venard, who sympathizes with Ricoeur's subjective and linguistic turn while remaining grounded in interpretive authority, history, and providence, offering what Matthew Levering calls a "participatory exegesis."

Keywords: Paul Ricoeur, Olivier-Thomas Venard, Poetics, Postmodernity, Biblical interpretation

Postmodernity has radically altered the way many understand Truth. Such a figure as St. Thomas Aquinas defines it in his *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate* q. 1, a. 1 as "conformity of thing and intellect." (Thomas Aquinas 1952) Postmoderns, such as Fredrich Nietzsche, however, ask

> What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms—in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are. (Nietzsche 1988, 46–47)

For Nietzsche, Truth is linguistic and a matter of perspective. It is subjectivist and a tool for mere power. Stanley Grenz summarizes this shift out of the Enlightenment into postmodernity nicely:

> The emphasis on holism among postmoderns is related to their rejection of [an] Enlightenment assumption—namely, that truth is certain and hence purely rational. The postmodern mind refuses to limit truth to its rational dimension and thus dethrones the human intellect as the arbiter of truth. There are other valid paths to knowledge besides reason,

> say the postmoderns, including the emotions and the intuition. … [T]he postmodern mind no longer accepts the Enlightenment belief that knowledge is objective. Knowledge cannot be merely objective, say the postmoderns, because the universe is not mechanistic and dualistic but rather historical, relational, and personal. The world is not simply an objective given that is "out there," waiting to be discovered and known; reality is relative, indeterminate, and participatory. (Grenz 1996, 8)

We might summarize this genealogy of Truth in the following way: first, there is the "classical" approach, which is, broadly speaking, Aristotelian-Thomistic. This approach entails a strict adherence to the correspondence principle understood in a totally objective way. In this approach, if something is true, it is true universally and objectively, independent of the subject. Human reason can achieve objective truth. In cases of ambiguity, man has recourse to some authoritative institution. Second is the modern approach. Like the classical approach, moderns believe reason can truly achieve objective truth; the correspondence principle upheld but only in a relative and subjective sense: if something is true, it is true only in a given frame of reference (i.e., it is relative). Moreover, it is only from the point of view and according to the interpretation of the observer (i.e., it is subjective). Unlike the classical approach—significantly so for this article—authoritative institutions no longer have final say in case of ambiguity. Finally, there is the postmodern approach: there is no such thing as Truth. Thus, the correspondence principle is meaningless and abandoned. We can still use the word "true," but it does not signify anything more than opinion or an individual picture of reality. In postmodernity there is a total rejection of the authoritative status of any formal institution. This approach leaves all authority to the subject.

In recent decades, postmodern thoughts on Truth have been applied to the arena of Biblical interpretation. Paul Ricoeur is a prime exemplar of this postmodernist application, working to give the subjective reception of scripture its due importance. If every subject who reads the Bible is unique, then the reception of the Biblical text speaks to every reader in a unique way. The subject's history, memory, knowledge, desires, and so on ought to be taken into account, as they help produce unique readings of the same perennial text. In this way Ricoeur sees the potential in postmodernity's subjective turn for a more creative dialogue around scripture within a believing community. While acknowledging, to some extent, the authoritative status of the Church, he moves to create the necessary space for the subject in scriptural interpretation. Ricoeur's project, something begun in the Protestant Reformation, remains important today, specifically within the Roman Catholic Church.

However, Ricoeur seems to fall into some errors when it comes to interpreting the Bible in particular. I argue that Ricoeur embraces too much of the postmodern ethos. Specifically, his rejection of authority is especially significant here. This rejection implies some problems with his metaphysics, which appears to deny the Bible's normativity. Ricoeur places too much importance on the dialectic between text and

subject. His project turns out to be immanentist and thus inadequate for understanding the Bible as a divinely revealed text.

Olivier-Thomas Venard also sees a great deal of potential in the postmodern subjectivist and linguistic turns. However, unlike Ricoeur, Venard by no means rejects the classical definition of Truth. He also wants to maintain the Roman Church's authority regarding Biblical interpretation and simultaneously encourage a creative subjective reception of the Bible. Holding these principles together goes toward increasing the Church's breadth of understanding of salvation history. Venard's approach is metaphysically transcendental where Ricoeur's is not, and Venard's interpretive principles flow from the very metaphysics presented by the Roman Church. As such, Venard adopts what Matthew Levering calls a "participatory exegesis." (Levering 2008, 1) I believe Venard's principles are sounder than Ricoeur's, since Venard's metaphysics takes the Bible at its own word as the revelatory gift of God Himself. This is to say, taken on its own terms, the Bible demands a posture of reverence and deference: "The word of God is living and effective" (Heb 4:12); "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Both Ricoeur and Venard acknowledge the importance of a "poetic" approach to Biblical hermeneutics. Such a hermeneutic is characteristically postmodern, given its subjectivist appropriation of the text. Venard remains metaphysically grounded and deferential to the ecclesiastical interpretive authority in his poetical Biblical hermeneutics. Venard, then, straddles the boundaries between classical, modern, and postmodern approaches (as laid out above) in a fruitful tension. Ricoeur, engaging is his own poetical and subjectivist hermeneutic, does not remain sufficiently metaphysically grounded, nor does he adequately acknowledge the interpretive authority of the Church. His project thus straddles the boundaries between, on the one hand, the modern approach (in his subjectivist, poetic-linguistic inclinations and the primacy he attributes to the text itself) and, on the other hand, the postmodern approach (in his denial of legitimate interpretive authority, his ahistorical approach, and subsequent implicit rejection of classical metaphysics). This tension fails to do justice to the Biblical text.

In the first half of this article, I will sketch Ricoeur's project and its merits before addressing what seem to be his modern and postmodern errors, specifically regarding authority and metaphysics. In the second half, I turn to lay out Venard's project. Understanding Venard's issues with the postmodern Biblical interpretation will help us understand his disagreements with Ricoeur's method. I also hope to show that Venard, while eschewing what he believes to be Ricoeur's errors, admires and sympathizes with the impetus behind Ricoeur's project. He attempts to offer a different yet fruitful way of appropriating the interpretive principles of postmodernity and applying those principles to Biblical interpretation.

1. Ricoeur

As said, I will examine two areas in which I think Ricoeur follows postmodernity in unhelpful ways. First, however, I briefly lay out the motivations behind some of his overarching project.

1.1. Ricoeur's Poetics

Kevin Vanhoozer notes that some contemporary scholars dismiss poetics, claiming that "'the poet nothing affirmeth,'" believing "that because poetry does not describe the actual world it does not say anything about reality." (Vanhoozer 1990, 61) Ricoeur wants to resist this "mathematization" of language, a characteristically modernist idea of Truth. He turns instead to poetry, believing that "the poet is the one who breaks the bond between language and things on one level in order to express significant truths about the human condition on another [level]"; it can "reach and express another 'layer' of reality." (Vanhoozer 1990, 61) In other words, poetical language can express realities that clear and distinct (i.e., mathematical) ideas cannot. In the modern and postmodern eras, as Venard notes, while "theology has been turned into a science and has become a sacred *mathesis*, far removed from real human life, literature, by returning to imagination and the senses and by using many symbols, is more attuned to the religion of the incarnation." (Venard 2009, 88)

Ricoeur follows Augustine's *De Magistro* and *De Doctrina Christiana*, acknowledging the sign-signified distinction. In *Critique and Conviction*, he tells us:

> On the one hand, the sign is not the thing; it is in retreat in relation to the latter and as a result of this it generates a new order that is organized according to an intertextuality. On the other hand, the sign designates something, and one must pay careful attention to this second function, which intervenes as a compensation with regard to the former, because it compensates for the exile of the sign in its own order. (Ricoeur 1998, 173)

In other words, as we are "exiled" from the *res*; we are relegated to the *signum*. However, to act as if the *signum* is unimportant in its own right is folly. Venard himself seems to echo this: "the text has its own proper reality." (Venard 2020, 62) To be sure, in the Biblical text, God speaks to humanity of a *res*, a thing beyond the text itself—specifically, a person: "in these last days, he spoke to us through a son" (Heb 1:2). Theologically, we might say God has spoken to humanity—in the person of the Son—from and in His very self. Still, the assertion that God has become incarnate does not mean He ceases to speak to humanity through signs. Though God is said to have revealed Himself to the human race, Ricoeur still holds that "the God who reveals himself [remains] a hidden God and hidden things belong to Him. … the one who reveals himself is also the one who conceals himself." (Ricoeur 1980, 93)

1.2. The Text in Itself and Its Autonomy

However, beyond this point, Ricoeur seems to place too much importance in a text—the sign—in its own right. Ricoeur appears to grant an autonomy to the text extrinsic to the reality it is meant to signify. Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg believe that Ricoeur seems at odds with the way Augustine understands his own ascending sign-thing distinction: "there is no referent beyond the text or word itself," believes Ricoeur, "for the word itself is the revelation. It is the text, the word, the *logos* (uncapitalized) that has assumed in the flesh the *Logos* (capitalized) once assumed in order to 'dwell among us.'" (Harrisville and Sundberg 2002, 302)

Ricoeur's principle of "distanciation" is also problematic. Distanciation, says Aaron Pidel, "suspends historical assumptions that would tie textual meaning forever to the 'world behind the text,' to the psycho-social circumstances of its production." (Pidel 2014, 195) Nirmeen Fawzy adds that a distanciated reading "frees the text of its author and of all that in view of which it was written." (Fawzy 2018, 255) We can clearly see here a resistance to historical-critical methodology and the absolute value the historical-critical method places upon the narrative's history. This makes sense, given that Ricoeur is attempting both to resist the rise of historicism and to eschew a purely empiricist epistemology. In our thought and our reading there ought to be, in Ricoeur's mind, a certain distinction and thus a distance between the text and the history out of which it came:

> The very act of writing "distanciates" a message from the immediate sphere of its author and confers on it a sort of semantic autonomy. Being externalized in writing, a text thus ceases to be "a message addressed to a specific range of readers; in this sense, it [the text] is not a segment of an historical chain. *Insofar as it is a text*, it is a kind of *atemporal* object which has, as it were, broken its moorings with all historical development." (Ricoeur 2016, 195)

In separating the text from its context, Ricoeur might be able to offer the subject a more pristine text—that is, a text not previously mediated by tradition or history. It is ripe for the subject's taking: the unique reception of the text is held in high esteem. The reverence Ricoeur shows the text—especially the Biblical text—is admirable.

However, I think this is to misunderstand what a text is. No text is produced in an ahistorical space, nor do we encounter any text in an ahistorical space. We read a text as embodied, historical humans, not in the isolation of Descartes' boiler room. By positing a pristine text, Ricoeur wishes to let the text simply *be*. In this way, he demonstrates his reverence for the Bible. There is a purpose to this letting-be. It aims to foster a dialectic between text and subject in which both further "become" themselves: "to understand oneself is to understand oneself as one confronts the text and to receive from it the conditions for a self other than that which first undertakes the reading." (Ricoeur 1991, 17) It is a poetic approach that allows "a text [to]

fire the imagination ahead of understanding, ahead of explaining, ahead of deciding for or against." (Harrisville and Sundberg 2002, 301) The text acts upon the subject and changes him or her. The text, though crystallized on the written page, is neither inert nor passive. As the text speaks to the reading subject, the text holds its own: it remains impervious to the subject's totally arbitrary manipulation. Any act of textual interpretation inevitably entails both a subject who is in flux and who will thus be changed after encountering the unchanging text.

> A *critique* of the illusions of the subject appears to be included in the very act of "understanding oneself before the text." Precisely because the subject carries himself or herself into the text and because the "structure of understanding" of which Heidegger speaks cannot be eliminated from the understanding that tries to let the text speak, for this very reason self-critique is an integral part of self-understanding before [i.e., in front of] the text. (Ricoeur 1991, 100)

When this self-critique is undertaken—when one humbles him- or herself before the text—Ricoeur believes the subject is opened up to a sort of metamorphosis that takes place in the imagination: "the power of allowing oneself to be struck by new possibilities precedes the power of making up one's mind and choosing." (Ricoeur 1991, 100) For Ricoeur, the "self disclosed by the biblical 'poetic' is thus a response to a discrete network of symbols within its canon," whether the reader knows (or likes) this or not (Harrisville and Sundberg 2002, 291). Thus, the interpreting subject must approach the text with humility if interpretation is to bear creative fruit. This is a virtue of Ricoeur's method.

Though the text holds a measure of autonomy, it remains lifeless until it is acted upon by the subject. This is a mutually enriching encounter. Harrisville and Sundberg believe that, for Ricoeur,

> At the heart of the "poetic" lies metaphor. Metaphor, the "transfer" of reality according to a new model, is what gives the "poetic" its power. Metaphor generates in me an "imagination" by which I respond to the text as opening to me a "world" or a new being, an imagination prior to my deciding or choosing. Metaphor, or the symbol that makes possible its "transfer," is not a defective language, nor a mere provisional device to be replaced by a concept. On the contrary, it reveals "aspects of the ineluctable"—something that cannot be the object of biological, psychological, or sociological knowledge. … It touches on the very essence of things. (Harrisville and Sundberg 2002, 289–90)

On his or her own, the reading subject do not get to determine the world into which the text introduces the subject. Rather, in a posture of acceptance, the reading subject receive the riches this particular text holds within itself for him or her. Though this world of the text is not of the subject's own making, the subject's reception

of it and his or her ongoing co-creation with it remains unique. Ricoeur calls this "appropriation." The reader, says Fawzy, can "make this meaning [of a text] his own," but this does not mean the subject is free to "impose his understanding on the text. … It is not a question of imposing upon the text our finite capacity of understanding, but of exposing ourselves to the text and receiving from it an enlarged self." (Fawzy 2018, 250) When the text is allowed to act upon the subject freely, it can have a transformative effect on that subject. So while

> science is embarrassed by ambiguity, poetry exults in it … by magnifying polysemy, by making words and sentences mean all that they can mean, Ricoeur hopes to bring back to language its capacity for meaningfulness. Though scientific language is clear and precise, it is not existentially *nourishing*. It has everything to do with the empirical world, and nothing to do with the existential. For Ricoeur, this omission of existence is the "original philosophical sin." Such a philosophy does not *speak* to us. It does not give us new meanings. Poetic language is, on the other hand, creative of meaning. Polysemy for Ricoeur is a virtue, not a vice, of language. (Vanhoozer 1990, 59)

As we will see, Venard takes up this ambiguity of language as a gift to theology today.

1.3. Problems with Ricoeur's Method

Ricoeur, then, provides the subject with the space to engage in an ongoing, creative relationship with the text. This approach, characteristically postmodern, is a helpful corrective to an overly objectivist approach that may become static. It also takes into account the fact that the subject is indeed human—that is, the subject is embodied, organic, growing, learning, feeling.

Still, though Ricoeur's project and principles are certainly thought-provoking, there seem to be problems. Distanciation, "characteristic of written communication, emancipates the text from historical determinations and thus 'transfers' it to a plane of timeless ideality." As such, "the written text enjoys a strong semantic autonomy from all aspects of its original historical horizon. Among these [are]: independence from 'the authorial intention, from its initial situation (its *Sitz-im-Leben*), and from its primitive audience.'" (Ricoeur 1995, 196) This approach is characteristic of the New Criticism, which arose in the early- to mid-twentieth century. This school of literary criticism

> sought to encourage the close reading of texts on their own terms. Rather than attend to the intentions of the author or the emotions or content expressed, these critics encourage attention to the structures of the text [themselves] … *form* distinguishes the work of art *from its context as an autonomous entity*. The new critics mandate that *form alone* is that to which we must attend if we are oriented to the work of art as art. (Eikelboom 2022, 313)

"A familiar charge against New Criticism," then, "is its lack of historical perspective." (Duvall 1992, 23) The text is an autonomous entity, interpreted apart from its historical context. We might say, using Ricoeur's term, that the New Critics read a text in a distanciated manner.

I believe the autonomy Ricoeur gives the text presents two significant problems for Biblical interpretation as Ricoeur understands it. The first concerns a typically modern and postmodern anti-theme, authority, while the second is postmodernist metaphysical problem.

1.3.1. Rejection of Authority

The first problem concerns authority. Pidel asks: "Given his [Ricoeur's] restriction of Scripture's revelatory function to the disclosure of a preconceptual horizon of significance"—in other words, if history ought to be sidelined when a text is interpreted—"how does he propose to discriminate between good and bad interpretations, between good and bad subjectivity?" (Pidel 2014, 201) When the text floats in a nebulous, ahistorical space, how does the subject know if he or she encounters and interprets the text well?

Pidel relates that when "speaking more specifically to biblical exegetes, Ricoeur strongly recommends the interpretive community as a guideline for interpretation. [Ricoeur says:] 'Finally—and perhaps above all—the field of possible interpretations is still limited by the communal character of the interpretation.'" (Pidel 2014, 201) Though this recourse to community seems a good instinct, Ricoeur still denies the community any *authoritative* interpretive role, in favor of a merely *contributing* one. "Ricoeur sees more peril than promise in the authoritative interpretation of Scripture through dogma." (Pidel 2014, 202) He believes the

> doctrine of a confessing community loses the sense of the historical character of its interpretations when it places itself under the tutelage of the fixed assertions of the magisterium. In turn, the confession of faith loses the suppleness of living preaching and is identified with the dogmatic assertions of a tradition and with the theological discourse of one school whose ruling categories are imposed by the magisterium. It is from this amalgamation and this contamination that the massive and impenetrable concept of "revealed truth" arises. (Ricoeur 1980, 74)

Here, Ricoeur displays a curious and confusing interest in the historical character of interpretations, given his normatively distanciated readings. In some places, he advocates for distanciated reading in which the text is bracketed from its history so as to make room for a fruitful encounter between subject and text in a space unhampered by authority. But here he appeals to the importance of the text's "historical character" in order to free the text from authoritative influence. Moreover, he sees the Catholic Magisterium as "authoritarian," implying that such authoritative bodies

quash creativity, since "revelation can never constitute a [mere] body of truths which an institution may boast of or take pride in possessing." (Ricoeur 1980, 74, 95) In other words, we cannot approach the text limited by any authority (modernist) nor bound by place (postmodernist). If such structures bind us, the text cannot work its transformative effects upon us.

True enough, the Bible stands as a distinct object, an object of unplumbable mystery, thus demanding reverence. But, as Venard will contend, it does not stand outside the Church, which helped produce and compile it. This would be to ignore the historical reality of the Bible's production. This implies that there are interpretations which the Church—as the legitimate interpretive authority—may rightfully declare sound or unsound. This also implies a metaphysics in which authority itself is a legitimate good. It further implies that there will be interpretive frameworks—and particular metaphysics—which the Church may declare appropriate or inadequate. Hans Boersma argues that "even when we're not aware of it, we still do metaphysics. … Good metaphysics leads to good hermeneutics. … The way we think about the relationship between God and the world is immediately tied up with the way we read Scripture." (Boersma 2017, 3–4, 9)

For Boersma and Venard, then, the question is not *whether* we may colonially impose a "foreign" metaphysics onto scripture; or, in Ricoeur's terms, *whether* any one body justly and authoritatively interprets a gift of revelation. Rather, we ought to ask *which* metaphysics we ought to work with and which body holds the legitimate authority to interpret the text. When these questions are answered, then we are in a position to interpret a scriptural text well. (These are the criteria Venard accepts and which guide his hermeneutics.)

On the one hand, Ricoeur calls for a distanciated reading of a text, i.e., a reading that eschews historical influence. On the other hand, he tells us we cannot subject any text to an authoritative body like the Magisterium because otherwise we strip away the "historical character of its interpretations." Ricoeur seems to want a community without authority—which seems to be no community at all, but rather anarchy. Authoritative reading and/or criteria for reading a particular text does not place a limit on the creativity and subjectivity essential to a rich reading of scripture. However, authority does reasonably place a limit on readings which would lead a subject to oppose his community's tradition. Every scriptural text is produced by a community. If, as Ricoeur believes, "poetic language is creative of meaning," it seems important that we have criteria which would help us know whether our creative dialectic with the text is good or bad (Vanhoozer 1990, 59). In this way, such limits actually free the reading subject in his or her interpretation.

It does not seem we can have what Ricoeur calls "good subjectivity" without recourse to authority. Subjectivity which is content to sit obediently under the auspices of tradition and authority is not a characteristically postmodern subjectivity—at least, it is not the kind that Ricoeur seems to want. Ricoeur believes working with an

"areligious sense of revelation helps us to restore the concept of biblical revelation to its full dignity." (Ricoeur 1980, 102) How so? Ricoeur claims that

> the poetic function incarnates a concept of truth that escapes the definition by adequation [the classical approach] as well as the criteria of falsification and verification [the modern approach]. Here truth no longer means verification, but manifestation, i.e., letting what shows itself be. What shows itself is in each instance a proposed world, a world I may inhabit and wherein I can project my ownmost possibilities. It is in this sense of manifestation that language in its poetic function is a vehicle of revelation. (Ricoeur 1980, 102)

This is to say that when we consider the Biblical text apart from a religious context—its communal and traditional context—we come to a purer understanding of the text which, in turn, will provide the subject with a richer field wherein he may appropriate ever more deeply the contents of the text.

This claim is problematic simply because it violates even the criteria of what George Lindbeck has dubbed "intrasystematic" truth claims. Such an account of truth is distinct from the classical definition. A statement is intrasystematically true when it coheres with a particular worldview which may or may not be ontologically true. Christians hold the Bible to be ontologically true, and some interpretations of the Bible as intrasystematically true or false. It also, then, has its own guidelines for intrasystematic truth (Lindbeck 1984, 64). The Biblical text is shaped in a religious context. If it is to be understood fully by any subject, it seems reasonable to claim that it must be interpreted within that text's tradition and the intrasystematic truth claims that particular tradition has set itself.

Thus Ricoeur advocates for what might be called a "sympathy-in-distance with the interpretive community, but not necessarily the adhesion of personal faith." (Pidel 2014, 202) That is, we ought to locate ourselves and our reading of a text outside of an authoritative tradition. This is a logical follow-through from the distanciated neutrality Ricoeur calls for in encountering the text: to the extent that *x* claims to be neutral, it cannot be authoritative. This, again, seems particularly postmodern.

How, though, can Ricoeur authoritatively claim that there ought to be no interpretive authority? We could ask who or what gives Ricoeur the right to grant any text such autonomy from authority. Is it merely from his own experience of reading and interpreting the Bible as such that has, for him, yielded the richest results? Even if this is the case, how are we to know it works for others besides Ricoeur himself? In making such a claim, Ricoeur situates himself in a particular metaphysics wherein authority is not authoritative.

1.3.2. Metaphysics

As mentioned earlier, there is a second issue regarding Ricoeur's distanciated approach, and it is more radical than the first. It involves what, exactly, Christians hold

the Bible to be. If Christians understand the Bible to be God's word, then a distanciated reading is unacceptable, inasmuch as the distanciated subject is called, in his or her interpretive work, to eschew the influence of the author. Because Christians understand the Bible to be God's word, the move to separate the Divine Author from the content of the Bible seems blasphemous—for, as the late Pope Benedict XVI says, "the messenger [is] himself the message." (Ratzinger 2007, 49) Cyril O'Regan affirms this: in Christ the Word there is a "union of signifier and signified." (O'Regan 2020, xiii) This is what sets the Biblical text apart from other scriptures, and this understanding is a metaphysically informed approach. As mentioned in the introduction of this article, this is what Levering calls a "participatory" approach. Not only, then, does Ricoeur "shy away from accounting for the church's role in establishing and interpreting texts"; it is also the case that, as Nicholas Boyle puts it, the "the Incarnation is not as central to either his biblical or his nonbiblical hermeneutics as ought to be the case." (Boyle 2005, 74)

To the extent that Ricoeur attempts to place the subject's encounter with the text prior to any account of metaphysics, I believe he gets the order of human knowing wrong: a communal encounter with a text, however foundational, is always preceded by a worldview that disposes the subject to the text in one way or another. Such is an inescapable part of being human, living in a temporal world.

Thus, the modern postmodern influences in Ricoeur bring both their advantages and disadvantages. We are given an alternative to a strict correspondence theory of truth regarding Biblical interpretation and introduced to a mode of interpretation more oriented to the dialectics of subject-object, reader-text, sign-signifier. However, Ricoeur gives too much emphasis to these dialectics, rendering them immanent, and would leave us without any authoritative guidelines.

2. Venard

In the second half of this article, I attempt do two things. First, I will summarize Venard's understanding of postmodernity so as to contextualize his response to Ricoeur. Second, I will offer a brief account of Venard's own project so as to offer a different way of interpreting the Bible.

2.1. Venard's Account of Postmodernity

In a brief but potent essay entitled "'Theology and Literature': What is it About?," Venard very helpfully lays out the genealogy of the theology-literature dialectic in modernity and postmodernity. This dialectic can be symbolized by the struggle between authority and self-determination, between truth and un-truth. Theologians

purport to deal with "real beings insofar as they derive from the one source [God]," and believe "imagination and credulity propel the literary world." (Venard 2009, 88) However, "poets and literary thinkers denounce theology's abstraction and dryness as compared to the liveliness of literature," and in recent centuries poetry has "set herself up as a religion, [with] the poets considering themselves magi, sorcerers, or prophets." (Venard 2009, 88) Venard quotes Arthur Rimbaud: "The Poet makes himself a seer by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses. … Because he reaches the unknown!" (Rimbaud 2005, 307)

So, while theology sets itself as the guardian of truth, postmoderns turn to literature, since for them, "ontological truth is a mirage"; thus, for the postmoderns, "we shall never go beyond human creativity." (Venard 2009, 90) While we have "become increasingly aware of both the frailty and inescapability of language and hence of the relativity of the human grasp on truth," words are still creative of meaning (Venard 2009, 90). Venard thus concludes that postmodern thought "may be characterized as a thinking process which cares ceaselessly about language." (Venard 2009, 90) Owing to its structuralism, relativism, and deconstructionism, truth is understood to be purely intrasystematic. Texts such as the Bible are, then—according to postmodern exegetes—to be interpreted purely intrasystematically.

Like Ricoeur, Venard is responding to an increasingly mechanized cosmos. He perceives that even the Church is influenced in this way, as seen in the rise of the historical-critical method in the twentieth century: "as literary criticism tended to sacralize literary productions, biblical criticism *de facto* secularized sacred texts by analyzing them 'scientifically' like other ancient texts." (Venard 2009, 88) The trick, for Venard, is to "distinguish the benign [and modern] relativism conveyed by the linguistic turn from the nihilistic opinions regarding truth [postmodern]." (Venard 2009, 91) A nihilistic interpretation of the Bible is fundamentally incompatible with its message as the Good News—thus, any linguistic analysis which gives into such a reading may be ruled out on both an ontological and intrasystematic basis.

2.2. A Metaphysical Critique of Ricoeur

Venard, then, does not embrace postmodernity without qualification. The dialectic between theology and literature is rooted in a metaphysical division: while theology presupposes authority and its implications, modern and postmodern literature does not. Venard, says Piotr Roszak, "insists that Ontology and Hermeneutics are inseparable." (Roszak 2018, 126) (Or, at the very least, we ought not to separate the two methodologically.) In other words, man's existence and the way he interprets the Bible are mutually informing as a matter of fact. We must, then, allow our metaphysical beliefs help shape our interpretation of the Bible. This is how Levering explains what he means by "participatory" exegesis:

> "Participatory" biblical exegesis holds that these original [historical] contexts [of the texts] never stand on their own. While temporal reality is a "linear" unfolding of moments, it is so precisely as participating in the triune God. … This is so because the intimate "vertical" presence of the Trinity's creative and redemptive action suffuses the "linear" or "horizontal" succession of moments. (Levering 2008, 1)

In the Incarnation and in the Bible, the horizontal is joined to the vertical. The vertical takes the horizontal up into itself: eternity sanctifies the temporal. The two are distinct but not to be separated in interpretive work.

As we mentioned, Venard's metaphysics informs his Biblical interpretation, but it is a metaphysics which is incongruous with radical postmodernity. Venard lays out a genealogy of metaphysics at length to demonstrate this:

> Not only is it possible to narrate the history of the doctrine of participation … but we can also establish its death certificate. This vision of being was not adopted in the secular thought which sprung from the introduction of Aristotelian naturalism in the west and the advent of the empirical sciences, which wished to study beings in their own context and thus independently of any theological presuppositions. From now on, presupposed metaphysical causes and observed concrete effects are separated in order to study each in its autonomy. The result has been that logic and metaphysics and noetics and dogmatics have been divorced for centuries. … the result was the possibility of thinking of the world without God. (Venard 2020, 425)

Ricoeur's distanciated and areligious Biblical hermeneutic is, in a way, to "think of the world without God." Venard's approach, then, is metaphysically incommensurate not only with radical postmodernity, but also with Ricoeur's project. While Ricoeur starts with the primacy of the text, participatory exegesis starts with the primacy of Providence. Ricoeur sees the subject as an autonomous interpreter of scripture, he does not grant the Church authoritative interpretive status, and he distanciates the text from history. In all these principles, while attempting to give the postmodern subject his interpretive due, Ricoeur essentially refuses to acknowledge a participatory method of Biblical exegesis. For Venard, on the other hand, the subject is *not* an autonomous interpreter of scripture, nor can the Biblical text be read stripped of metaphysical prejudice and historical context, since the subject must interpret within his own historical context and within the authoritative and historical Church. This is a Church which understands itself both to have been instituted by God and to have established the canon of the Biblical text under divine inspiration. The Bible cannot be read correctly without this understanding of the Church. Venard would deem Ricoeur's methodology inadequate because his method is insufficiently metaphysical.

Venard might also think that Ricoeur's methodology is inadequate because the latter's method is insufficiently historical. Levering argues that the "insistence of

the validity of the participatory aspect of historical realities upholds history's *linear* dimension against postmodernism, by affirming the existence of an intelligible continuum." (Levering 2008, 7) Benedict XVI claims that "it is of the very essence of biblical faith to be about real historical events. It [the Bible] … is based on history, history that took place here on this earth. The *factum historicum* (historical fact) is not an interchangeable symbolic cipher for biblical faith, but the foundation on which it stands." (Ratzinger 2007, xv) Rather than establishing his interpretive methodology upon the metaphysical reality of an incarnate God whose providence pervades history, Ricoeur centers his method around the text itself, the subject receiving it, and the dialectic between the two. To the extent that this is the case, his hermeneutics seems to remain closed and immanent.

Levering and Joseph Ratzinger, on the other hand, offer an approach which is as radically open to the wondrous and free inbreaking of the transcendent as Ricoeur's subject is open to the text set before him. Ricoeur's subject allegedly becomes more than himself in his free encounter with the text. However, Harrisville and Sundberg note that, in this free encounter, "no interpretation of a text is without a 'wager' since no absolute criterion exists for determining its rightness or wrongness." (Harrisville and Sundberg 2002, 301) Much like a Nietzschean, postmodern morality beyond good and evil—in which the subject is exhorted to the perilous task of creating right and wrong—Ricoeur urges the reading subject to undertake the interpretive task without authority. If there are no authoritative guiding principles, the risk of interpretation is constant and real.

Benedict XVI, on the other hand, adopting a participatory metaphysics, argues similarly that the "'People of God' … transcend[s] itself in Scripture." (Ratzinger 2007, xxi) He further observes that "The process of continually rereading and drawing out new meanings from words would not have been possible unless the words themselves were already open to it from within" (Ratzinger 2007, xx), and if these words were not already read within an authoritative tradition. Acceding to the interpretive authority of the Roman Church's Magisterium, Benedict actually provides more creative space to the work of Biblical interpretation.

Thus, as the text bears within itself its own radical depth, so too does a participatory reading. This is a depth that extends not only downward into the heart, but also carries the heart, suffused with the grace and peace the Bible wishes to give, upwards to the text's Divine Author. The historical-critical method, and the emphasis it places on history itself, can, for participatory exegesis, "in some sense catch the sounds of a higher dimension through the human word, and so open up the [historical-critical] method to self-transcendence. But its specific object is the human word as human" and is, as such, immanent (Ratzinger 2007, xvii).

2.3. Venard: Sympathies with Ricoeur

For all their foundational disagreements, Venard's poetic project bears a striking resemblance to Ricoeur's. According to Roszak, Venard perceives that "since being always discloses itself enigmatically, a fundamental task at hand is the care for language." (Roszak 2018, 126) Thus, while he will value the *res* more highly than the *signum*, Venard will also attend to the latter—the language that simultaneously reveals and conceals—in its own right. Signs conceal because by definition they cannot reveal the fulness of the thing they point toward. Still, signs hold within themselves an intrinsic intelligibility and nability to truly point toward the signified thing. This has a strong metaphysical warrant: "Is not the *verbum*, the 'Word' in God, the metaphor-source which authorises human speech about God?" (Venard 2015, 213–14) That the Word has become flesh indicates to man that his language is capable of grasping at, even if as only through a glass darkly, mysterious yet true realities. Because God is radically transcendent, our language will only ever fall short. Every similarity, as Lateran IV states, bespeaks an ever-greater dissimilarity.

Thus, it seems that our language about God can only ever be metaphorical or analogical at best. It is at analogy's limit that Venard's participatory exegesis is especially profound: "the 'things' aimed at by the sacred writer … are not entirely captured by natural human language: unable to say them, it must manifest them." (Venard 2020, 63) The Word, because it transcends human speech and thus would remain forever inaccessible to man, becomes incarnate. The incarnate Word is the preeminent sign, since as "Word Christ is the identity of the signifier and signified. As such he redeems backwards all that could at best have meaning inchoately." (O'Regan 2020, xv) This is reminiscent of the encounter on the road to Emmaus in Luke's Gospel: "Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27).

In this, Venard's project is more radical than Ricoeur's: it is, says Roszak, "an attempt to overcome the immanentist positions of structural [i.e., postmodern] linguistics by referring to Aquinas's reference attitude. In this manner, Venard's research draws attention to the significance of Aquinas's hermeneutics and to the wide range of tools of linguistic expression." (Roszak 2018, 124) Venard is particularly incisive here: paying attention to the signs in their own right does not tie the interpreter down to an immanentist approach. Rather, as the interpreter attends to signs in their own right (still with an eye towards something higher), he or she actually gains greater clarity with regard to the *res* signified. "Seeing the confluence between the subjective austerity of modernism and the formal laconism of Aquinas," Roszak observes, "Venard constructs the option of 'alternative modernity,' where a metaphysics dependent on linguistic expression is appreciated." (Roszak 2018, 126)

Venard's linguistic turn is catalyzed by his encounter with postmodernity.

> *Yes*, language is inescapable, and any reflection on thinking, or being, or the functioning of language, will have a tautological turn since it will always already mobilize what it tries to explain. But *no*, it does not mean that the inescapability of language is a *fatality*. Another option is possible, which considers it simply as *fact*—not fate. *Yes*, propositions about the origin, the essence or the functioning of language may only be manifested and explained—not demonstrated. But *no*, this does not mean that truth is inaccessible. (Venard 2009, 91)

Modernity's moral relativism and postmodernity's epistemological skepticism force us towards language and metaphor as an "exchange" or "substitute" for religion, but at the same time force us to acknowledge the "frailty" of language (Venard 2009, 90–91). For Venard, though, that language cannot grasp God fully is not something to be lamented. The fact that signs both reveal and conceal does not worry him. Rather, this simply "means that truth is *mediated* (revealed and given) in language within a given culture in which codes and performances will prove essential to accessing truth." (Venard 2009, 91) Theological language is simply able to "say something about the disclosure of meaning in words and in the world," but what theology asserts, it asserts "as *simply* true," albeit a "non-demonstrable, yet prob/vable truth." (Venard 2009, 92) Theological truth is conveyed through language—but if the content of these truths is ultimately "more-than-reason" can grasp (Venard 2009, 88), a "fundamental task at hand [for the theologian] is the care for language." (Roszak 2018, 126) This is where poetics enters: that which reason cannot comprehend, poetic language helps gesture towards in an albeit fuzzy yet nonetheless true way because it is, as Ricoeur himself affirms, "creative of meaning." (Vanhoozer 1990, 59) Kathleen Norris puts it helpfully:

> The job of the poet is to draw up out of the unconscious an awareness of something that is even greater than anything that can be expressed in words. It might even be called a revealing of God's presence, or God's incarnating in a particular way to this particular poet, whose task it is to articulate the experience and pass it on. To surprise you. To shake you up. To renew your sense of wonder at your being, and God's being, and the mystery of creation. (Norris 2022, 312)

Poetics, Ricoeur believes, "has the power to disclose new ways of being" (Harrisville and Sundberg 2002, 289)—that is, it is capable of "drawing up," as Norris says, an awareness of something whose reality transcends articulation so as to "shake you up." It is as Rilke says at the end of his "Archaic Torso of Apollo": "You must change your life." Theology, then, for Venard, "has to recover its *poetic* dimension." (Venard 2009, 92) Moreover, if the Bible is meant to reveal that "God is love" (1 John 4:19),

then it must also work to enflame the heart for love of God. Where clear but limited scientific language cannot do this, poetic language can.

In this way Venard confidently embraces postmodernity's linguistic turn. As Ricoeur wished to give an exalted place to the text, so too does Venard—yet within its proper metaphysical and historical context. It is language that helps us do this, for it reminds us that, in our reading of Scripture, we cannot understand the depths of God's mystery in all its fulness.

> In short, if we accuse theology of masking, if not outright denying, the problem of language, it [theology] at least preserves intact the *real* duality of immanence and transcendence in the sign and in language by not pretending to reduce or simplify their dialectic into an autonomous and definitive theory. But in their fundamental materialism, contemporary perspectives on language can no longer even see the existence of a problem: the incommensurability of the signified to any signifier, of conceptualization and sensation! (Venard 2020, 311)

At bottom, language can do work for Venard that it cannot for Ricoeur: it can disclose really and truly supernatural realities and truths for the theologian, but it cannot do this for a postmodern. For the latter, language can only *hint* at such truths which man creates for himself.

For Venard, at the first, we must undertake a "serious engagement with what one could call the scriptural metaphysics of the Bible" which "proves to be pivotal." (Venard 2015, 227) This engagement ought to be a poetic one: it accepts classical, ontological truth but also turns to subjectivist and intrasystematic truth claims. This is an account which is not afraid to make truth claims which are not simply verifiable but existential.

Conclusion

Ricoeur admirably emphasizes the subjectivity of textual interpretation. However, this emphasis goes too far, to the point of setting the importance of subjective interpretation over and against dogmatic commitments, commitments which, though perhaps *prima facie* constraining, are ultimately liberating. Authoritative interpretive guidelines work to provide a more fertile ground for the imagination which encounters the Biblical text, as opposed to an imagination which approaches the text with no such guidelines. We might say that an absolutely unrestrained imagination is a lost imagination. Imagination freed by its commitment to a tradition and its intrasystematic truths, on the other hand, is free for something higher than itself. I have tried to emphasize that the sign, not just the *res*, is important in its own right. Still, this does

not mean the sign does not continue to refer to something beyond itself. Signs are, in fact, made for the sake of the *res*. As such, Ricoeur seems to get his teleology wrong. In his account, the text—particularly the Biblical text—points back to the subject and back again in an immanently contained polarity (however potentially rich and beautiful). Against Ricoeur, the horizontal dialectic must be open to the vertical inbreaking of transcendent, an inbreaking that will lead to an indwelling of the Spirit, and not merely an enriching of the self as a reading subject.

Vanhoozer summarizes: "lacking in Ricoeur's otherwise brilliant philosophical rehabilitation of metaphor is any indication of how one may judge the difference between good and bad metaphors." (Vanhoozer 1990, 66) In other words, how—without an interpretive authority—can one know whether the imagination treads a dark and dangerous path or a path of light and truth? Ricoeur wants to let the text speak for itself so as to enrich the imagination. However, in doing so, like so many modern, Enlightenment thinkers, he rejects authority.

Ricoeur's project ultimately seems rooted in postmodernity's move towards a subjectivism which displaces legitimate authority. Insofar as his subjectivism is rooted in a deep respect for the text and the reading subject, it is helpful. He sees that the text truly has a transformative power when the reader presents himself before it with humility. Still, Ricoeur's metaphysics remains characteristically postmodern—distanciated, ahistorical—and thus inadequate with respect to Biblical hermeneutics specifically.

Venard's project bears similarities with Ricoeur's. Both are motivated by encounters with postmodernity's subjective and linguistic turns, both appreciate these turns as opportunities for intellectual growth, and both turn to poetic language in response. Where Ricoeur rejects the Church's authority and works within an immanentist metaphysics, however, and whose project ultimately remains immanentist, Venard accedes to the Church's authority and remains metaphysically grounded; in so doing, his project transcends the merely immanent.

We may draw the following conclusions. Ricoeur's Biblical hermeneutics are situated on the border of a modern approach and a postmodern approach. Modern, because of the primacy attributed to the subject and the text itself (as opposed to the Church) and in its relativist, subjectivist and poetic-linguistic inclinations; postmodern, in its denial of classical metaphysics and subsequent ahistorical hermeneutic and in its strong rejection of any interpretive authority.

C.S. Lewis believes that, when we read, "we seek an enlargement of our being. We want to be more than ourselves. Each of us by nature receives the whole world from one point of view with a perspective and a selectiveness peculiar to himself," and our readings are "saturated with, and limited by, our own psychology." (Lewis 1992, 137) Our confrontation with a text, while profoundly personal and subjective, is *a fortiori* communal. When interpretation of the Bible attempts to remain purely subjective—or even within a dialectic of subject and text—interpretation remains limited.

He goes on to say: "The man who is contented to be only himself, and therefore less a self, is in prison. My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others. Reality, even seen through the eyes of many, is not enough. I will see what others have invented." (Lewis 1992, 140) Ricoeur's project helps us to see the way many others receive the Word and words of God. While this certainly goes for reading great literature, it applies all the more to the Bible: in reading the Bible, the reader sees through the eyes of its Divine Author not just an invented world, but reality itself as it has been created, laid out for humanity as the history of salvation. As the Bible is read in the community which shaped it—namely, the Church—it shares what others have created.

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