

PAUL RICOEUR'S HERMENEUTICS OF THE TEXT

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The hermeneutical journey from Schleiermacher to Ricoeur reaches a milestone in Ricoeur, whose hermeneutics of the text is, in part, a synthesis of the earlier theories of hermeneutics, especially those of Heidegger and Gadamer, and, in part, a genuine offspring of the eclectic mind of Ricoeur. The appeal of Ricoeur's project lies in its inter-disciplinary approach. "In Ricoeur's hands", remarks Lewis S. Mudge, "interpretation is always confronted with the perspective of 'counter-disciplines': psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, the history of philosophy ..."¹

How does Ricoeur gloss the term "hermeneutics"? In "The Task of Hermeneutics," he propounds the view that "hermeneutics is the theory of the operation of understanding of texts"² In almost identical terms, he observes, in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, that "by hermeneutics we shall always understand the theory of the rules that preside over an exegesis, that is, over the interpretation of a particular text, or of any group of signs that may be viewed as a text"³, and, in his "Preface to Bultmann," he specifies that "hermeneutics is the very deciphering of life in the mirror of the text."⁴

In Ricoeur's project, text-interpretation turns out to be the paradigm for interpretation in general, and hence his focus on the hermeneutics of the text. In "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theology," he points out that his objective is to develop a "hermeneutics based on the problematics of the text".⁵ Explicating the concept of a text, in "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding" Ricoeur notes that "a text is any discourse fixed by writing."⁶

In *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, he asserts that "discourse is the event of language"⁷ and points out that "*if all discourse is actualized as an event, all discourse is understood as meaning.*"⁸ In "The Model of the Text : Meaningful Action considered as a Text"⁹ he discusses the hermeneutics of the event and of discourse with regard to spoken and written forms. Firstly, discourse, which exists as a Fleeting event in the instance of discourse, is fixed by writing, thereby leading to a dialectic tension between discourse as event and meaning. Secondly, discourse, which is self-referential in the instance of spoken discourse and is marked by an immediacy and a shared environment, becomes autonomous and public in writing. As Ricoeur puts it "the text's career escapes the finite horizon of its author".¹⁰ Thirdly, discourse's actual reference to a world is realized differently in "event" and in "meaning". While the former is underlined by a shared environment between the interlocutors, the latter is characterized by liberation from the narrowness of the dialogical situation for meaning "frees its reference from the limits of ostensive reference"¹¹. Fourthly, the auditors in discourse vanish in the transition from speaking to writing "an unknown invisible reader has become the unprivileged addressee of the discourse."¹² Here it has to be noted that "meaning" surpasses and transcends the "event".

The transition from speaking to writing is underlined by distancing to alienation (*Verfremdung*), which has wide ramifications with regard to text-interpretation, and Ricoeur remarks that "the text ... is the paradigm of the distancing in all communication."¹³ In the movement from speech to writing, he points out that what is fixed in writing is "not the event of speaking, but the 'said' of speaking (the propositional content) where we understand by the said the intentional exteriorization constitutive of the aim of discourse..."¹⁴. In the transition from speaking to writing, is there any spillover of meaning? In other words, can the "meaning" pole retrieve the "event" pole completely?

The movement from speech to writing, according to Ricoeur, engineers a three-fold distancing. The triple distancing introduced by writing are: "(1) distancing from the author; (2) from the situation of discourse; (3) from the original audience."¹⁵ It has to be noted against this backdrop that semantic autonomy is inbuilt in the text, and Ricoeur propounds the view that the text

"produces a double eclipse of the reader and the writer," i.e. "the reader is absent from the act of writing, the writer is absent from the act of reading (death of the author)"¹⁶.

In the context of alienation or distanciation engendered by the transition from speech to writing, the three-fold semantic autonomy of the text with regard to the authorial intention, the original situation of discourse and the original recipients needs to be elaborated upon. In "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," Ricoeur declares,

The essence of a work of ... a literacy work, or a work in general, is to transcend its psycho-sociological conditions of production and be open to an unlimited series of readings, themselves situated within different sociocultural contexts. In short, it belongs to a text to decontextualize itself as much from a sociological point of view as from a psychological one, and to be able to recontextualize itself in new contexts.¹⁷

Secondly, as a result depsychologization and decontextualization, the text is open to virtually 'any' reader and to polysemous readings. "A written text," notes Ricoeur in *Interpretation Theory*, "is addressed to an unknown reader and potentially to whoever knows how to read" and adds that "this universalization of the audience" which calls for a plurality of interpretations is "the dialectical counterpart of the semantic autonomy of the text."¹⁸

In Ricoeurian hermeneutics, alienating distanciation is not looked upon negatively in a historicist manner as that which needs to be overcome or bridged. On the contrary, distanciation turns out to be the very condition of interpretation because it paves the way for semantic autonomy. Therefore, distanciation is no more alienating but "productive... according to which the predicament of cultural distance would be transformed into an epistemological instrument."¹⁹

Ricoeur carefully avoids the dangers of adopting a rigid and extreme stance with regard to the fallacy of the authorial intention, and its obverse, the fallacy of the absolute text. He points out in *Interpretation Theory* that "de-psychologizing of interpretation does not imply that the notion of authorial meaning has lost all significance." Approaching the issue from the other end,

he comes up with "the fallacy of the absolute text: the fallacy of hypostasizing the text as an authorless entity."²⁰ Similar to Hirsch's procedures of validation of interpretation in *Validity in Interpretation*, Ricoeur presents guidelines to arbitrate and adjudicate between multiple readings. He writes that "it is always possible to argue for or against interpretations, to arbitrate between them. An interpretation must not only be probable, but more probably than another interpretation."²¹ This had promoted Gillespie to write that "Ricoeur seems to give back what he has taken away by his advocacy of semantic autonomy."²² Thus Ricoeur skillfully avoids the extreme stance of the intentional fallacy and the fallacy of the absolute text."

To Ricoeur, understanding, explanation and appropriation comprise a triad. While Dilthey arrogated explanation to the natural sciences, and understanding to the human sciences, Ricoeur brings about a rapprochement between *Erklären* and *Verstehen*. While Dilthey got trapped in an 'either-or' situation between explanation and understanding, Ricoeur fused the two and highlighted the dialectical relationship between them. While explanation is more concerned with the semiological system, understanding, on the other hand, focuses on the semantic system, and unless there is a grafting of the semantic pole onto the semiotic pole, interpretation will be incomplete. Ricoeur in "The Model of the Text" declares that "understanding is entirely mediated by the whole of explanatory procedures which precede it and accompany it"²³ and concludes the essay by remarking that "ultimately, the correlation between explanation and understanding, between understanding and explanation is the 'hermeneutic circle.'"²⁴

By trying to reconcile "explanation," the epistemological pole, with "understanding," the ontological pole, Ricoeur attempts to weave together a hermeneutic fabric with the epistemological strands of Dilthey and the ontological strands of Heidegger and Gadamer. He develops this dialectic in two movements. From understanding to explanation, and secondly from explanation to comprehension wherein appropriation plays a crucial role. While the understanding pole is related to guessing, the explanation pole is linked to validation, and the back and forth movement (hermeneutic circle) between guessing and validation results in an interpretation which is "more probable

than another interpretation."²⁵

The third element in the triad is existential appropriation, and without appropriation, declares Ricoeur, the understanding process is incomplete. Appropriation not only completes the triad but "culminates in the self-interpretation of a subject who henceforth understands himself better, understands himself differently or simply begins to understand himself."²⁶

Highlighting the dialectical relationship between distanciation and appropriation, he points out in *Interpretation Theory*, that "distanciation meant above all estrangement, and appropriation was intended as the 'remedy, which could 'rescue' cultural heirtages of the past from the alienation of discourse."²⁷ Significantly, the positive spin-off of the concept of appropriation is that it renders contemporary the meaning of the text for the reader. Hence Ricoeur's statement "above all, the characterization of interpretation as appropriation is meant to underline the 'present'character of interpretation."²⁸

Appropriation or assimilation, the ultimate stage in the hermeneutic process, furthers self-understanding by mediating between the text and the self. Morny Joy in "Rhetoric and Hermenutics" comments that "for Ricoeur, any increase in textual understanding will also invite a concomitant growth in self-understanding."²⁹ From the Ricoeurian standpoint any interpretive activity is intimately related to self-understanding so that text-interpretation as well as other kinds of interpretation turn out to be a means, a detour to the whole issue of self-understanding. Hence Ricoeur remarks that "to make one's own' what was previously 'foreign' remains the ultimate aim of all hermeneutics."³⁰ Joy concludes that "as promoted to Ricoeur, hermeneutics is a philosophy of self-understanding with far-reaching implications."³¹

NOTES

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Essays in Biblical Interpretation*, Ed. Lewis S. Mudge, SPCK. London, 1981, p.2
2. Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermenutics," Trans. David Pellauer *Philosophy Today*, 18 (1973), p.1
3. Rieoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, Trans. Dennis

- Savage, Yale UP, New Haven and London, 1970, p.8
4. Ricoeur, "Preface to Bultmann" in *Essays in Biblical Interpretation*, p.53
 5. Ricoeur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Theology," *Theology Digest*, 24.2 (1988),p.155
 6. Ricoeur, "What is a Text? Explanation and Understanding," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics II*, Trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson, Northwestern UP, Evanston, 1991,p.106
 7. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Texas Christian UP, Texas, 1976, p.9
 8. *Ibid*, 12
 9. Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text : Meaningful Action considered as a Text," *New Literary History*, 5.1 (1973), P.93-97.
 10. *Ibid.*, 95
 11. *Ibid*, 96
 12. *Ibid*. 97
 13. Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," Trans, David Pellauer, *Philosophy Today*, 17.2 (1973) p.130
 14. Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text," p.93
 15. Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," p.134
 16. Ricoeur, "What is a Text", p.107
 17. Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," p.133
 18. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p.32
 19. *Ibid.*, 89
 20. *Ibid.*, 30
 21. *Ibid.*, 79
 22. Thomas Gillespie, "Biblical Authority and Interpretation : The Current Debate in Hermeneutics," in *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Trends in Biblical Interpretation*, Ed. Donald K. Mckim, William E. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Michigan,1986, p.202.

23. Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text," p.116
24. *Ibid.*, 117
25. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p.79
26. Ricoeur, "What is a Text?" p.118
27. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p.89
28. Ricoeur, "What is a Text?" p.119
29. Morny Joy, "Rhetoric and Hermeneutics," *Philosophy Today*, 32.4 (1988), p.279
30. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, p.282
31. Joy, "Rhetoric and Hermeneutics," p.282.

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