

# **Reading Ricoeur: Authors, Readers, and Texts**

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss the debate<sup>1</sup> over authorial intention and reader response<sup>2</sup> to the text, with specific reference to

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<sup>1</sup> This subject has received a tremendous amount of discussion in our contemporary context. We shall mention only a few examples: E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967. W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978. U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979. J. P. Tompkins, ed., *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. F. Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism*, London: Methuen, 1983. W. V. Harris, *Literary Meaning: Reclaiming the Study of Literature*, London: Macmillan, 1996. For an excellent bibliography of work in the field of reader-response criticism see Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism*, 233-272.

<sup>2</sup> See E. Freund, *The Return of the Reader: Reader-Response Criticism*, London: Methuen, 1987, 7, who points out that reader-response theory or criticism is a term with manifold representations: the implied reader (Iser), the model reader (Eco), the ideal reader (Culler), the actual reader (Jauss), the informed reader (Fish). Our concern is limited to the general theoretical component which considers the flesh and blood reader. We shall not focus, for example, on the dimension of readers in the text per se. Within our limited field of inquiry however, the role of the text, from what might be referred to on a sliding scale as more or less of a concern for the text, remains an interest. In other words, the text can play a greater or lesser role in the readerly interpretive effort depending on where it is situated on the scale. Two examples of this would be: S. Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary*

the work of Paul Ricoeur.<sup>3</sup> Ricoeur has had, over the last twenty five years, a tremendous impact on the problematic of hermeneutics in general and Biblical hermeneutics in particular.<sup>4</sup> His writings continue to stimulate interest, raise questions, and give rise to thought, hence, the merit of an analysis of his perspective.

## 2. A Brief Overview of the Contemporary Context

Seán Burke suggests, the crisis of post-modernism is a crisis of authorship.<sup>5</sup> Where is the author in the contemporary hermeneutical enterprise? According to Roland Barthes,

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and Legal Studies, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, (less textual), and W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, (more textual).

<sup>3</sup> The sheer immensity of Ricoeur's writings makes it impossible to cover all the intricate details of his position. Our attempt is rather to lay out the general contours of his thought on this question.

<sup>4</sup> See P. Ricoeur and A. LaCoque, *Penser la Bible*, Paris: Seuil, 1998, (*Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, ET) for a recent example.

<sup>5</sup> S. Burke, "Introduction: Reconstructing the Author", in: S. Burke, ed., *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995, xv-xxx, esp. xxix. "When we consider that the war on totalities must be a war waged on the transcendental / impersonal subject through whose putative construction totalities emerge, it becomes clear

the modern scriptor . . . is not the subject with the book as predicate; there is no other time as that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written *here and now* . . . For him, on the contrary, the hand cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription (and not of expression) traces a field without origin - or which, at least, has no other origin than language itself, language which ceaselessly calls into question all origins.

Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather the immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred. Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile.<sup>6</sup>

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that the great crises of postmodernism are crises of authorship even if they still disdain to announce themselves as such."

<sup>6</sup> R. Barthes, "The Death of the Author", in: *Image-Music-Text*, Paris: Seuil, 1977, reprinted in: Burke, *Authorship*, 125-130, esp. 127-128, (parenthesis and *Italics* his). W. V. Harris, *Literary Meaning*, 30-35, argues that Barthes is strong on rhetoric, yet weak on explanation. Harris claims that Barthes assumes and does not argue or demonstrate the death of the author.

Do authors, in our contemporary hermeneutical context, have rights, aims, and purposes or are they merely ideological fabrications?<sup>7</sup> In many cases, authors seem to be ejected from texts as quickly as survivors might attempt to parachute from burning airplanes.

One might ask, if authors are mortally wounded can meaning livingly survive? J. S. Croatto, for example, argues that authors die in the inscribing of their message. This sacrificial "act", as it were, is one in which one lays down one's life.<sup>8</sup> We might also reflect on the work of Stanley Fish and his famous statement with regard to authorship and the interpretation of a text: "the reader's response is not to the meaning, it is the meaning."<sup>9</sup>

Others argue however, that authors and their intentions were previously considered, up until recent times, as important for hermeneutics. Kevin Vanhoozer states:

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<sup>7</sup> S. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels: The Theoretical Challenge*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, 38. Moore clearly sides with the latter. "If he is not simply to be regarded as a historical figure inefficiently managing our scholarly discourse in absentia, from some remote point antecedent and external to it, who or what is he in addition?"

<sup>8</sup> J. S. Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning*, New York: Orbis, 1987, 16-17.

<sup>9</sup> S. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?, The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1980, 3.

..... premodernity and modernity alike shared a similar aim in interpretation: to recover the meaning of the text, understood in terms of the intention of the author. .... up until fairly recently there was a near consensus on the importance of the author's intention.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps, on taking Croatto's understanding an "act" further, some might query whether there is yet a place for the resurrection of the author and his/her intention with regard to textual interpretation? If the total focus of meaning is located in the reader reading the text, what is the role of author and text in the hermeneutical trajectory?

Within this somewhat recent phenomenon in both literary theory and Biblical interpretation<sup>11</sup> there is then the contemporary notion that readers, by decree, requisition the primary place and become the ultimate consideration with regard to Biblical - textual meaning and interpretation.<sup>12</sup> It is argued that this has led to the reader achieving

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<sup>10</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning in This Text?*, The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 74.

<sup>11</sup> S. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels*, 107. Moore argues "reader theory in literary studies is a Pandora's box into which we, infant literary critics of the Bible, have barely begun to peer."

<sup>12</sup> For some of the implications with regard to Biblical texts see, N. Petersen, "The Reader in the Gospel", *Neotestamentica* 18, (1984), 38-51. E. V. McKnight, *The Bible*

something of a celebrity ranking within hermeneutics. Susan Suleiman states:

The words *reader* and *audience*, once relegated to the status of the unproblematic and obvious, have acceded to a starring role.

Today, one rarely picks up a literary journal on either side of the Atlantic without finding articles (and often a whole special issue) devoted to the performance of reading, the role of feeling, the variability of individual response, the confrontation, transaction or interrogation between texts and readers, the nature and limits of interpretation - questions whose very formulation depends on a new awareness of the audience as an entity indissociable from the notion of artistic texts.<sup>13</sup>

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and the Reader: An Introduction to Literary Criticism, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985. R. Detweiler, ed., Reader Response Approaches to Biblical and Secular Texts, Semeia 31, Decatur: Scholars Press, 1985. R. M. Fowler, Let the Reader Understand. Reader Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991. K. J. Vanhoozer, Is There A Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> S. R. Suleiman, "Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Orientated Criticism", in: S. R. Suleiman and I. Crosman, eds., The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, 3-45, esp. 3-4. (*Italics hers*).

What are we to make of the role of authors and the relatively recent emphasis on readers in response to the text?<sup>14</sup> How is it possible for texts, the Biblical text - narratives, to refigure readers lives? Do authors count? Have God and Author been sacrificed on the altar of the reader?

### 3. Reading Ricoeur

Our primary focus, after having briefly sketched something of the wider context of the discussion, is with an investigation into Ricoeur's views on authors, readers, and texts. We must point out, however, that our analysis is not so much centered on the textual landscape of sense and reference (although this remains a consideration), as it is on the general question of how Ricoeur envisions the authors and readers of narratives - texts.

We shall first undertake an examination of reading and readers. According to Ricoeur, hermeneutics is concerned with more than just the text. Within the task of hermeneutics, as opposed to semiotics, both author and reader have a legitimate place and must be included

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<sup>14</sup> R. A. Reese, *Writing Jude: The Reader, the Text, and the Author*, Sheffield: Unpublished PhD Thesis, 1995, 3. She states, "I am not interested in discovering *the* meaning of the text. Instead, I want to see the text expand its meaning potential as it interacts (through me) with other texts in the textual sea."

in the operational trajectory of the interpretation of the text.<sup>15</sup> In other words, in Ricoeur's narrative vocabulary, mimesis II (configuration) must be connected to the two sides of mimesis I (prefiguration) and mimesis III (refiguration)<sup>16</sup> through the act of reading. Ricoeur states the following with regard to hermeneutics:

Elle ne se borne pas à placer mimèsis II entre mimèsis I et mimèsis III. Elle veut caractériser mimèsis II par sa fonction de médiation. .... le lecteur est l'opérateur par excellence qui assume par son faire - l'action de lire - l'unité du parcours de mimèsis I à mimèsis III à travers mimèsis II.<sup>17</sup>

In this hermeneutical scenario the passage from mimesis II to mimesis III takes place through the act of reading.<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur appeals to Roman Ingarden, Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss for a theory

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<sup>15</sup> We shall see more clearly what role Ricoeur attributes to "author" and "reader" below.

<sup>16</sup> For a full explanation of this Ricoeurian terminology and its significance for authors, readers and texts than it is possible to develop here, see Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I-III, Paris: Seuil, 1983-1985. (Time and Narrative, I-III, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988, ET).

<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I, 86. (Time and Narrative, I, 53, ET).

<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, III, 246-247. (Time and Narrative, III, 168-169, ET), argues with respect to the act of reading, that there is a triple dialectic in a phenomenology of

of reading a text.<sup>19</sup> Such a theory must continue, in Ricoeur's opinion, to be preoccupied with the problematic of the reference of the text.<sup>20</sup>

However, at this juncture, we need to take a relevant detour into a Ricoeurian shift. It is important to point out that Ricoeur, while continuing to use the term "reference" in *Temps et récit*, modifies it with the term "refiguration." This is the case for at least the following reasons.

In *La métaphore vive*,<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur wrote of metaphorical reference as extralinguistic. In his opinion, such statements have a capacity to refer outside the closed boundaries of language itself. This perspective also holds true for narrative, yet with regard to *Temps et récit*, Ricoeur, states:

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reading: discordant concordance, lack of determinacy and excess of meaning, familiar and unfamiliar.

<sup>19</sup> R. Ingarden, *Das literarische Kunstwerk*, Second Edition, Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1961, (The Literary Work of Art, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, ET). W. Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. H. R. Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, and *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I, 117-124. (Time and Narrative, I, 77-82, ET).

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, *La métaphore vive*, Paris: Seuil, 1975, 273-324. (The Rule of Metaphor, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977, 216-256, ET).

I would say today that a connecting link was missing between reference, considered the intention belonging to the metaphorical statement, and hence still to language, and the being-as detected by the latter. This intermediary link is the act of reading. .... Now the act of the poet is abolished in the poem uttered. What alone is relevant is the act of the reader who in a certain way makes the metaphor, by grasping the new semantic relevance along with its impertinence in the literal sense.<sup>22</sup>

For Ricoeur metaphor is not limited to the innovation of meaning, but it extends to the power of the redescription of the real, more generally speaking, to our being-in-the-world on the level of both language and ontology. In re-working the conception of metaphorical reference, Ricoeur now extends it to narrative, but because of the complications of reference (which is described as to tied to existential logic or analytic philosophy for example),<sup>23</sup> he underscores:

I came to say that metaphorical and narrative statements, taken in hand by reading, aim at refiguring reality, in the twofold sense of *uncovering* the

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<sup>22</sup> Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, L. E. Hahn, ed., Chicago: Open Court, 1995, 29.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, L. E. Hahn, ed., 47. Also, *Temps et récit*, III, 13, "l'herméneutique du << réel >> et de l' << irréel >> sort du cadre assigné par la philosophie analytique à la question de la référence." (*Time and Narrative III*, 6, ET).

concealed dimensions of human experience and of *transforming* our vision of the world. ... refiguring seemed to me ... to constitute an active reorganization of our being-in-the-world, performed by the reader following the invitation of the text.<sup>24</sup>

From this point of view, a reader is not just dealing with text meaning (sense), but also the text reference transmitted through its meaning (sense). However, what Ricoeur now views as essential to hermeneutical equation is the reader, who becomes one of the key reasons for the move from reference to refiguration.

It is only because text and reader each have a world that there can potentially be a confrontation and intersection between the two, which then has the possibility of leading to a refiguration of the world of action.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the configured text - narrative has a world and the reader has a world. Refiguration takes place through the effect the plot (configuration) generates on the reader reading (mediation) and acting on this plot in time.<sup>26</sup>

We shall now bring the detour to a close. A reading theory, according to Ricoeur, transfigures the question of reference into one of

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<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, L. E. Hahn, ed., 47. (*Italics* his.)

<sup>25</sup> See also Petersen, "The Reader in the Gospel", *Neotestamentica* 18 (1984), 38-51, esp. 42-43 for another perspective on text, world, and reader.

<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I, 116-117. (*Time and Narrative*, I, 77, ET).

refiguration, now incorporating the reader and the phenomenon of reading, which were not taken into sufficient consideration in *La métaphore vive*.<sup>27</sup>

A Ricoeurian hermeneutics attempts to pay the closest attention to the motion of the unfolding of the world of the text in front of itself, while being less concerned with restoring the author's intentions which lie behind the text.<sup>28</sup> The vis-à-vis of the text is not its author, but its sense and reference, its configured world. A readerly appropriation of a text is to understand oneself in front of the world the text projects.<sup>29</sup> Without this mediation by the reader, according to Ricoeur, the text cannot refigure human action in time.

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<sup>27</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, III, 229-231. (Time and Narrative, III, 158-160, ET).

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I, 122. (Time and Narrative, I, 81, ET). Also, A. Thomasset, *Paul Ricoeur: Une poétique de la morale*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium CXXIV, Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996, 271-272, who also alludes to this motion in Ricoeur's hermeneutics.

<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur, "La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation", in: *Du texte à l'action*, Paris: Seuil, 1986, 101-117, esp. 116-117. "Ce que finalement je m'approprie, c'est une proposition du monde; celle-ci n'est pas *derrière* le texte, comme le serait une intention cachée, mais *devant* lui, comme ce que l'oeuvre déploie, découvre, révèle." ("The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation", in: *From Text to Action*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1991, 75-88, esp. 87-88, ET). (*Italics* his). Also, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 92-94.

Furthermore, with regard to both historical and fictional narrative, the former through reference by traces and the latter through metaphorical reference, there is an interface with human action in time. As a result of this interface read narratives have the capacity to refigure the temporality of readerly human action.<sup>30</sup>

Ricoeur, in *Temps et récit*, accentuates the role of the reader in the hermeneutical trajectory. His awakening to the necessary mediation of the reader can be understood from the perspective that Ricoeur has now given recognition, not only to the epistemological criteria of the text - narrative, but also to its ontological criteria.<sup>31</sup> This new apperception came about because the world of the text had previously remained, in his opinion, a world exceeding the text's structure, yet with the result that there was no way of linking it up with the world of the reader. Ricoeur states:

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<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, III, 229-263 and 371-374. (*Time and Narrative*, III, 158-179 and 259-261, ET).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 148-150, esp. 149. (*Time and Narrative*, III, 100-101, ET). Ricoeur points out that both history and fiction affect their readers and both relate to the "réel". Ontological criteria return at this stage of *Temps et récit*, showing that both history and fiction pose a "représentance" ("standing-for") which has possible positive affects on readers. "C'est à travers la lecture que la littérature retourne à la vie, c'est-à-dire au champ pratique et pathique de l'existence."

Certes, en adoptant ainsi, comme dans *la Métaphore vive*, la thèse selon laquelle l'oeuvre littéraire se transcende en direction d'un monde, nous avons soustrait le texte littéraire à la clôture que lui impose - à titre légitime, d'ailleurs - l'analyse de ses structures immanentes. Nous avons pu dire, à cette occasion, que le *monde* du texte marquait l'*ouverture* du texte sur son << dehors >>, sur son << autre >>, dans la mesure où le monde du texte constitue par rapport à la structure << interne >> du texte une visée intentionnelle absolument originale. Mais il faut avouer que, pris à part de la lecture, le monde du texte reste une transcendance dans l'immanence. Son statut ontologique reste en suspens: en excès par rapport à la structure, en attente de lecture.<sup>32</sup>

In our opinion, it appears that Ricoeur joins the contemporary hermeneutical movement with its emphasis on the reader. While Ricoeur practices a form of reader-response theory, his following of Iser and Jauss shows that his is of a milder form than that of Fish or Barthes. However, Ricoeur leaves us with several questions here. What prohibitions are there for readers not to simply devise and be responsible for creating their own meaning/s of the text - narrative? Do

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 230. (Time and Narrative, III, 158-159, ET). (*Italics* his).

readers determine, constitute, or discover textual meaning/s?<sup>33</sup> Is it possible for a reader to misinterpret a text?

We shall now turn to the question of author's intent. Whether a more recent phenomenon or having its origin in a previous era, an "anti-authorial" project has recently constituted itself as a prominent component within the interpretive landscape.<sup>34</sup>

Ricoeur affirms that texts always have authors, while at the same time he argues texts are to be understood as having an autonomy at the level of the original author's intention. Ricoeur points out:

.... writing renders the text autonomous with respect to the intention of the author. What the text signifies no longer coincides with what the author meant; henceforth, textual meaning and psychological meaning have different destinies.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See N. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse, Philosophical Reflections on the claim that God speaks*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, 130-152, for a discussion Ricoeur's view of text and author.

<sup>34</sup> For a fuller discussion see, S. Burke, "Introduction: Reconstructing the Author", in: S. Burke, ed., *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, xv- xxx.

<sup>35</sup> Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation", cited from, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 131-144, esp. 139. While this may or may not be the case, Ricoeur

The text's career escapes the finite horizon lived by its author. What the text means now matters more than what the author meant when he wrote it.<sup>36</sup>

For Ricoeur, a text or narrative has an author, but this author's intent is neither retrievable, nor is it significant for its reader. With regard to Ricoeur's understanding of a text as discourse fixed by writing and as event and meaning, as our investigation has already pointed out, it is the event which disappears along with the author's intent, while the meaning remains fixed by the text. In other words, the saying vanishes (event), while the said endures (meaning). Ricoeur attempts to preserve the "said" while eschewing what he presumes is a psychological event which is related to the intent of an author.

In the 1998 collaborative volume *Penser la Bible* (Thinking Biblically, ET),<sup>37</sup> one of Ricoeur's more recent efforts, he continues to devalue authorial intention as a valid part of the hermeneutical endeavor. With regard to the Biblical text, it is argued, that there is a "dynamisme textuel" at every level of Biblical literature, however, this

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shows his assumption that an author's intention is psychological. Might it not be otherwise?

<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 30.

<sup>37</sup> P. Ricoeur and A. LaCocque, *Penser la Bible*, (Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies, ET).

dynamism has no recourse to an author's intent, but rather is related to the original authors being aware of an incompleteness which asks to be, "re-modelé, ré-effectué par la communauté seule dépositaire des textes."<sup>38</sup> The authors state:

Le premier effet de l'écriture (la lecture?) est de conférer au texte une autonomie, une existence indépendante, qui l'ouvre ainsi à des développements, à des enrichissements ultérieurs, lesquels affectent sa signification même.<sup>39</sup>

Ricoeur and LaCocque frame the Biblical text as autonomous<sup>40</sup> and in need of a completion or fulfillment by its reading community. From this point of view, it is argued that the autonomy of the text is

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 11-12. (Thinking Biblically, xiii, ET).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 9. (Thinking Biblically, xi, ET). Parenthesis mine. The reason for this parenthesis is that the English translation reads, "The first effect of 'reading' .... ."

<sup>40</sup> See also Ricoeur, "Herméneutique et critique des idéologies", in: E. Castelli, ed., *Démystification et Idéologie*, Paris: Aubier, 1973, 25-64, reprinted in: *Du texte à l'action*, 333-377, esp. 366. ("Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology", in: *From Text to Action*, 270-307, and in: J. B. Thompson, ed., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 63-100, esp. 91, ET), for a fuller statement on the autonomy of the text.

related to the author, not the audience. In this sense, the authors contend:

Le texte existe, en dernier ressort, grâce à la communauté, pour l'usage de la communauté, en vue de donner forme à la communauté.<sup>41</sup>

However, it is the text itself that is plurivocal and therefore must be read at several levels. As readers and reading communities have differing interests in the Biblical text there will be differing receptions of it. A textual plurivocity, which links up with that of a plurivocal reception, underscores a diversity of reading levels engendered by the same text.

In reference to the Biblical text and what is identified by these authors as the, "communautés de lecture et interprétation", the hermeneutical circle functions in the following manner: in the

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<sup>41</sup> P. Ricoeur and A. LaCocque, *Penser la Bible*, 12. (*Thinking Biblically*, xiii, ET). Does the Biblical text exist solely because of its community of readers? See D. Stewart, "Ricoeur on Religious Language", in: L. E. Hahn, ed., *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 423-442, esp., 438, for another point of view. Stewart sets forth the perspective that Ricoeur would affirm that without a historical event there is no "text" to confront a community of readers.

interpretation of "Les Écritures" this community interprets itself.<sup>42</sup> What is of import to us here is again the affirmation and emphasis on the text and the place it is given within this discussion of thinking Biblically.

Si ce cercle herméneutique peut ne pas être vicieux aux yeux des fidèles des communautés concernées, c'est que le rôle de fondation attaché aux textes sacrés et la condition d'être fondé de la communauté historique ne désignent pas des places interchangeables. Le texte fondateur instruit: c'est le sens du mot << tora >> ; et la communauté reçoit l'instruction.<sup>43</sup>

While the text and the community of readers remain central and authorial intention remains underplayed,<sup>44</sup> the function of the text and

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<sup>42</sup> See L. Fisher, "Mediation, Mythos, and the Hermeneutical Circle in Ricoeur's Narrative Theory", in: M. Joy, ed., *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation*, Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997, 207-219, for a useful discussion of what, in her opinion, is the crucial importance of the hermeneutical circle in Ricoeur's thought.

<sup>43</sup> P. Ricoeur and A. LaCocque, *Penser la Bible*, 15. (*Thinking Biblically*, xvi-xvii, ET).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 9. (*Thinking Biblically*, xi, ET). In relation to the text's autonomy there is the added inference of a renunciation of what these authors refer to as the "caractéristique de l'herméneutique romantique", which seeks to discover the intention of the author. While Ricoeur and LaCocque do not entirely deny the appropriateness of Biblical research having a legitimate concern for an author, date, and placing of a Biblical text, they do argue: "nous tenons que la signification d'un texte est chaque fois un événement qui naît

the community, in the opinion of Ricoeur and LaCocque, are not the same. The text, in this case the First Testament, takes a priority position in the founded community of readers. In regard to this, on the reader's part, there is then a necessary recognition of an asymmetry between authoritative text and listening reader.

Within this hermeneutical proposition, in order to listen to Biblical thinking the reader is obliged to enter the circle. This entry requires, according to these authors, a participation both in imagination and sympathy with the act of adhesion through which a community of readers is founded. It is argued that it is only within this sharing that there is a possibility of accessing the meaning of these texts.

In summary, Ricoeur's work remains axed on the textual and especially since *La métaphore vive* on the reader. He is concerned to refute the psychological excesses of authorial intent text interpretation, which reduces hermeneutics to seeking a connection with another mind, yet he also opposes the thought that the text is a closed system of signs.

While Ricoeur's position may offer a valid critique to some modernist interpretation theories, in our opinion, it has several

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au point d'intersection entre, d'une part, des contraintes que le texte apporte avec lui et qui tiennent pour une large part à son *Sitz im Leben* et, d'autre part, les attentes différentes d'une série de communautés de lecture et d'interprétation que les auteurs présumés du texte considéré ne pouvaient anticiper." (*Italics theirs*).

weaknesses. When Ricoeur argues that a discourse (text) is "somebody saying something to someone"<sup>45</sup> his tendency is to down-play the knowability of the intent of the "somebody" when it comes to the written text. However, is it not possible to critique a rationalist, structuralist or Romanticist hermeneutics without resorting to the necessary exclusion of authorial intent?

Furthermore, how does Ricoeur's view square with his own position and intent being able to be communicated through his written discourse when he, for example, seeks to defend his not mixing philosophy and theology or vice-versa?

I hope that my readers will agree that I have gone to such lengths not to mix these genres that I might well be accused of personal inconsistency. All things considered, I am more willing to be the target of this suspicion than of that of confusionism, mixing crypto-theology on the philosophical plane and crypto-philosophy on the plane of exegesis and theology!<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 30. With respect to the view of Ricoeur and LaCoque mentioned above we propose the following question: Why would imagination and sympathy not also be necessary readerly components when it comes to someone's acts of reading somebody's intended text?

<sup>46</sup> Ricoeur, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, L. E. Hahn, ed., 149.

It is certainly true that the intentionality of an author may not always be transparent, but it nevertheless, in concern for the Other and others, demands an interpreter's attention.

We would like to challenge Ricoeur's position on the text as it relates to author's intentions. In our opinion, there is at least implicit evidence of the practical necessity of the acceptance of the reality that author's intentions do count more than Ricoeur makes them out to, when it comes to the interpreting of texts. We shall argue that this is true with regard to Ricoeur's own work, as well as to his perspective of the texts of others.

Ricoeur, in our point of view, is not entirely consistent. There are a number of occurrences in his work, at least on the implicit level (if not the explicit), of a different perspective. In *Penser la Bible* (*Thinking Biblically, ET*),<sup>47</sup> for example, there seems to have been an effort by each author to write in the context of having read the other author's work and taken it into account:

L'exégète a d'abord rédigé sa contribution, sur laquelle le philosophe a ensuite réagi. Puis ils ont tous deux accordé leurs contributions respectives de

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<sup>47</sup> P. Ricoeur and A. LaCocque, *Penser la Bible*, (*Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies, ET*).

manière à donner à leur dernière rédaction la structure d'un livre où l'un tient compte de l'autre.<sup>48</sup>

In order for such a venture to fulfill its goal, in our opinion, it would seem that the other author's intentions cannot be entirely ignored in the process of working together to produce a single volume.<sup>49</sup> These authors also write of their shared conviction with regard to certain points of view which they have written about in this particular book.<sup>50</sup> However, in taking these authors contention of the autonomy of the text seriously, one must ask if it is rather the text that has conviction, and not per se the authors?

In another context Ricoeur writes of the practical articulations related to narrative and how Heidegger's existential analysis in *Being and Time* can play a central role, although this must be framed in certain way. Ricoeur firstly seems to presuppose the understanding of Heidegger's intended existential analysis and then secondly, his own capacity to be able to frame this "sous certaines conditions qui doivent

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 7. (Thinking Biblically, ix, ET).

<sup>49</sup> We acknowledge that the scenario is different with a living author. However, why should it be presupposed that a once living author's literary act is to be minimized when it comes to reading his/her text?

<sup>50</sup> P. Ricoeur and A. LaCoque, *Penser la Bible*, 16-17. (Thinking Biblically, xvii-xviii, ET).

être clairement établies."<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur, at least, implicitly accepts both Heidegger's and his own intentions as authors and we would surmise their relevance for interpreting *Being and Time* and *Time and Narrative*.

One further example of Ricoeur's, at least implicit concession to authorial intention, is found in the context of his discussion of the work of Genette on narrative in *Temps et récit II*. Ricoeur writes of the "intention" of Genette, not merely what the text says.<sup>52</sup>

We contend for the possibility that authors intents more specifically, as well as texts and readers, must be taken into consideration in the hermeneutical enterprise. Generally speaking, it is ironic, how authors often demand the right to defend what they have written in a text in spite of maintaining that the author's intentions are unrecoverable or even unnecessary.<sup>53</sup>

This is also most noticeable, either when authors are asked what they meant when a reader wants to know if they have understood their work or if they are accused, for example, by a critic of meaning

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<sup>51</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, I, 96. (*Time and Narrative*, I, 60, ET).

<sup>52</sup> Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, II, 121. "En fait, Genette lui-même se référait au texte fameux de Platon dans « Frontières du récit ». Mais son intention était alors polémique." (*Time and Narrative*, II, 180, ET).

<sup>53</sup> A most simple example of this is in copyright laws which recognize the "rights" of authors.

something they never intended. The response is frequently, "I meant to say .... in regard to that argument or that person's position, or I did not mean that and have been misunderstood, as I really meant ....."<sup>54</sup>

The previous argumentation, it may be said, is based on the possibility of questioning "living authors", but is it not arguable that it

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<sup>54</sup> See Ricoeur, "Poetry and Possibility: An Interview with Paul Ricoeur", in: *The Manhattan Review*, 6-21, reprinted in: M. J. Valdés, ed., *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991, 448-462, esp. 459-460. We have already mentioned several instances of this ambiguity in Ricoeur's work. Two further examples: First, in a response to the question of the subject and society, Ricoeur argues for a subject who is responsible for his/her words. If this is not the case, we are no longer in a position to speak of freedom and the "rights of man." If this is the case, might it not be appropriate to speak of the "rights" of authorship also? Ricoeur calls for an "*ethic of the word*" and the basic moral duty "that people be responsible for what they say." (*Italics his*). "The Creativity of Language", in: R. Kearney, ed., *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, 17-36, reprinted in and cited from: *A Ricoeur Reader*, 463-481, esp. 477. In an age with such a profound and certainly correct emphasis on human rights should not the rights of an author also be taken into consideration in the interpretation of the text? Second, Ricoeur comments that, "Thompson is right" concerning the emphasis of the "operative concept of the text" in four of Ricoeur's essays. He goes on to write that "... this concept had been introduced with the express intention .... ." "A Response by Paul Ricoeur", in: J. B. Thompson, ed., *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, 32-40, esp. 37. This seems to imply that there could be a getting it "wrong" and an authorial intent.

may equally apply to authors that are not living except through their texts? No one denies, for example, that the Biblical writers have passed from the scene. However, is it not possible that we are left with the author's literary action (not so much now being there - but having been there)? In Ricoeur's terminology perhaps the question could be addressed to him in this manner: is the text not the "trace" or "testimony" of an author intending something to someone? Does not Ricoeur admit as much in the following statement?

Le témoin est témoin des choses arrivées. On peut penser que le souci d'inscrire la prédication chrétienne dans les catégories du récit, comme narration des choses dites et des choses faites par Jésus de Nazareth, procède de cette intention de suturer le témoignage-confession au témoignage-narration. Cette conjonction est opérée de façon diverse par les quatre Évangélistes et l'on pourrait constituer une typologie sur cette base. A une extrémité de l'éventail on aurait Luc, à l'autre Jean. ... Or, c'est Jean qui, de tous les Évangélistes, est par excellence le héraut du témoignage.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ricoeur, "L'herméneutique du témoignage", *Archivio di Filosofia* 42, (1972), 35-61, reprinted and cited from *Lectures III*, Paris: Seuil, 1994, 107-139, esp. 121-123. ("The Hermeneutics of Testimony", in: L. S. Mudge, ed., *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 119-154, esp. 134-137, ET). One wonders if the author continues to have a voice in testimony?

Do authors and testimony have a link that readers have a responsibility to pay attention to? Kevin Vanhoozer makes a helpful observation with regard to testimony in arguing:

"testimony, of all literary forms, is least welcoming to deconstruction and radical reader-response criticism. For the reader to impose his own meaning or to affirm indeterminate multiple meanings is to deny the very nature of testimony; it is to subject testimony to interpretative violence. Rightly to receive testimony, I shall argue, means to attend to and respect the voice of the author."<sup>56</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion.

We shall conclude our investigation in the following manner. Ricoeur has written above that the world of the text remains latent when not read. If this is the case, using his terminology, is it more appropriate to speak of the world of the text becoming a world "for me" when I read it? Perhaps it is possible to distinguish between text

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<sup>56</sup> See Vanhoozer, "The Hermeneutics of I-Witness Testimony: John 21.20-24 and the Death of the 'Author' ", in: A. Graeme Auld, ed., *Understanding Poets and Prophets: Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson*, Sheffield: Journal of Old Testament Studies Press, 1993, 366-387, esp. 367-368, for a fuller critique of modern and post-modern perspectives on the author.

"world - meaning" and "meaning - world" for me. Does the latency of the world of the text affect its truly being a world? If a narrative is configured at the level of mimesis II would it, whether or not it is read, in its world still remain a world?<sup>57</sup> Is it not possible for a text to be complete without being dependent on its reader to complete it?<sup>58</sup> For example, is a piece of music a piece of music, if it is never played?<sup>59</sup> Ricoeur's readerly point of view, at this stage, is more aesthetic than rhetorical,<sup>60</sup> and as such it favors a reader's response to the text over a reader's responsibility to the intent of its author.

Several recent exemplary works effectively take the intent of the author in a direction that Ricoeur himself has explored and given

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<sup>57</sup> Temps et récit, III, 239. (Time and Narrative, III, 164, ET). Ricoeur states, "Sans lecteur qui l'accompagne, il n'y a point d'acte configurant à l'oeuvre dans le texte; et sans lecteur qui l'approprie, il n'y a point de monde déployé devant le texte."

<sup>58</sup> Ricoeur, Du texte à l'action, "Qu'est-ce qu'un texte?", 137-159, esp. 159 "... la lecture est cet acte concret dans lequel s'achève la destinée du texte." (From Text to Action, "What is a Text?", 105-124, esp. 124, ET).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 153, "...la lecture est comme l'exécution d'une partition musicale; elle marque l'effectuation, la venue à l'acte, des possibilités sémantiques du texte." (Ibid., 119, ET).

<sup>60</sup> Ricoeur, Temps et récit, III, 243-245. (Time and Narrative, III, 166-167, ET). See M. Warner, "The Fourth Gospel's Art of Rational Persuasion", in: M. Warner, ed., The Bible as Rhetoric: Studies in Biblical Persuasion and Credibility, Warwick Studies in Philosophy and Literature, London: Routledge, 1990, 153-177, for a useful discussion of rhetoric.

careful attention to, but not drawn out the significance of with reference to the written: intended human action.<sup>61</sup> Rather than equating authorial intention with a purely psychological phenomenon, as Ricoeur often seems to do, the support for authorial intention focuses on intention as act.<sup>62</sup> A text therefore can and should be considered an author's literary act shown the due respect and care of the interpretive act. As it would be inappropriate, or perhaps even disastrous to ignore a speaker's intention, might not this hold true to some degree at least, with regard to a text in general and to a Biblical text in particular?

While it is true that textual interpretation is always mediate, indirect, a task of seeking sense, as opposed to immediate, direct, or a givenness of completed sense, a text is never entirely semantically

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<sup>61</sup> See for example, M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985. N. Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. K. J. Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge*. W. V. Harris, *Interpretive Acts: In Search of Meaning*, and *Literary Meaning: Reclaiming the Study of Literature*.

<sup>62</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning in This Text?*, 225.

autonomous.<sup>63</sup> Texts are author intended entities, not necessarily enclosed within the psychological constraints of their author, but opened by a literary act which unfolds a world out into the world, which a reader's world is then able to engage with.

We have argued there is an ambiguity with regard to Ricoeur's position on author's intention. Is it warranted, or even appropriate to continue to refer to "the author", while at the same time arguing that "the author's intent" can be depreciated when interpreting a text? Perhaps, in the light of this ambiguity, Ricoeur might consider a modification of his point of view that an author's intentions are by and large irrelevant to the interpretation of texts. Authors intentions must be considered as pertinent to textual interpretation as it is their communicative actions that set the literary genre and content of the

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<sup>63</sup> M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, 9-11, argues, "As interpreters of the Bible, our only concern is with 'embodied' or 'objectified' intention ..... . In my own view, such intention fulfills a crucial role, for communication presupposes a speaker who resorts to certain linguistic and structural tools in order to produce certain effects on the addressee; the discourse accordingly supplies a network of clues to the speaker's intention. The text's autonomy is a long-exploded myth: the text has no meaning, or every kind of meaning, outside the coordinates of discourse that we usually bundle into the term 'context'."

text.<sup>64</sup> A search for the meaning of Biblical texts is to be concerned with what authors have accomplished as an action of communication. This perspective is not a return to a psychological intentionality, which Ricoeur rightly critiques, but a turn to the author's literary act.<sup>65</sup>

## SUMMARY

Paul Ricoeur's writings have had a profound impact on hermeneutics and Biblical hermeneutics over the last twenty - five years. It is imperative

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<sup>64</sup> D. Dutton, "Why Intentionalism Won't Go Away", in: A. J. Cascardi, ed., *Literature and the Question of Philosophy*, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, 192-209.

<sup>65</sup> In personal discussion and correspondence the present author posed the following question to Ricoeur: "how is it possible, in your hermeneutics, to speak of a necessary love for the Other/other, yet ignore the intention of the author of a text? Ricoeur agreed that it is important to be sympathetic to authorial intention (here the concern was the Bible) and responded in the following way: "The question is not to deprive the authors from their commitment, but to wonder to what extent the authority of the author on his/her text is part of the meaning." Personal correspondence with Ricoeur, 28 May, 1999.

that theologians, historians, and literary critics become more familiar with his massive body of work in order to affirm and critique Ricoeur's venture, and to assess its impact in their various disciplines.

This article is focused on a reading of Ricoeur's notion of authors, readers, and texts. It comprises four parts. First, the main question of the paper is introduced: authorial intention and reader response. What is Ricoeur's perspective on these hermeneutical problematics?

Second, the contemporary context of the debate concerning the role of the author and reader in the interpretation of the text is briefly situated and discussed. Are author's and their intents still a relevant hermeneutical consideration? Should readers reign in the enterprise of interpreting the text?

Third, there is an evaluation of Ricoeur's perspectives, principally on the role authors and readers, although the text is also included in this reflection. How does Ricoeur view author and reader, especially in his more recent contributions, *Temps et récit* (Time and Narrative) and *Penser la Bible* (Thinking Biblically), which is more focused on Biblical hermeneutics?

Fourth, the conclusion draws together the results of the investigation.