THE PASCHAL IMAGINATION: OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION

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BY WAY of introduction to these reflections on the contemporary hermeneutical discussion in relation to New Testament research, let me sketch out their scope and nature. This paper is, in no sense, a full-scale treatment of the subject of New Testament hermeneutics. Rather, it is an attempt to say as much as I can see at the moment in order to invite others to train their own longer or brighter beams on the same territory.

In nature, the inquiry I am engaged in is, to a large degree, frankly philosophical. It is a metadisciplinary, foundational inquiry into the meaning, conditions of possibility, and true dimensions of biblical interpretation, with the long-term goal of fostering the emergence of a full-scale, nonreductive interpretation theory for New Testament research.

Some biblical scholars, especially Protestant scholars of conservative bent, might immediately object that this task was soundly completed long ago and that, while minor repairs and even major expansions of the methodological abode become necessary from time to time, there is no need to build a new foundation for the house. Some others, particularly Roman Catholics, might feel a less theoretical uneasiness about undisguised philosophical activity within the biblical household. For good historical reasons, such people suspect that the philosophical nose under the biblical tent flap will be followed by a theological camel. The hard-won freedom of Catholic exegesis from dogmatic control is too recent and still too precarious to risk by reopening philosophical issues of interpretation.

By way of preliminary justification of the project, let me observe that all interpretation, no matter what its methodology, operates out of hermeneutical presuppositions that are philosophical, that is, ontological, epistemological, and aesthetic in nature. To be unaware of these presuppositions does not make them inoperative; it simply makes them ideologically tyrannical.

To state the matter somewhat dramatically, the hermeneutical presuppositions out of which much current exegesis is done are outmoded, theoretically inadequate, and disjointed. As Richard Soulen says in his article on hermeneutics, "Non-evangelical Biblical criticism, from the late 19th century on, captivated by the newly discovered tools of historical

and literary criticism, evolved in the main without a general theory of interpretation at all."[1] The exegetical results of such vastly improved methodology have been sufficiently impressive over the last century to mask the disarray of its hermeneutical foundations. However, this disarray is beginning to manifest itself today in the inability of the discipline to integrate new approaches to the text, be they structuralist, sociological, psychological, or literary, into a coherent general theory of interpretation, because, in fact, no such general theory exists. Likewise, the dissatisfaction of many, scholars as well as lay people, with limited, and sometimes sterile, results of the only kind of exegesis that current exegetical methodology can justify, suggests that the problem does not originate at the methodological level. Hence the necessity, I would even say the urgency, of reopening the foundational hermeneutical question in the context of contemporary philosophical and literary theory.

SUBJECTIVITY, OBJECTIVITY, AND POSITIVISM

In the first part of this paper I would like to explore the notions of objectivity and subjectivity in relationship to the problem of historical positivism in biblical research.

A central methodological and substantive concern of anyone working in the field of biblical interpretation is objectivity. To clear the way for an eventual resituation of this concern within the hermeneutical sphere, I shall distinguish the use of the terms "objectivity" and "subjectivity" at the ontological, epistemological, and methodological levels in order to make clear that the content of the two terms and the relationship between them is quite different at each level and that failure to attend to this difference has serious consequences for interpretation theory and exegetical practice.

At the ontological level, objectivity refers to the status of the real as such. In ontological terms, a hallucination is as objective as an elephant, i.e., both are quite real, though in different ways. Subjectivity, at the ontological level, refers to personal self-presence as the locus of experience. The two terms, at the ontological level, are not contradictory. Subjectivity is quite objective, i.e., real. Neither are the two terms correlative at this level, for they are not on the same plane. Objectivity qualifies all reality, whereas subjectivity is the modality of a certain class of beings, namely, persons.

At the epistemological level, objectivity refers to the otherness of the nonself as perceived or perceivable by the self. Subjectivity is the characteristic of the self as knower, however the process of knowing is understood and however the result of that process is described. At this

[1] R. N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976) 74.

level the terms are correlative contraries, with subjectivity enjoying a real but frequently unrecognized priority.[2] It is the subject who, so to speak, "steps back" from his or her coparticipation in the life world and constellates some part of the world as the other, the object, in relationship to itself. It is also the subject's perspective which determines the character (though not the reality) of the object's otherness. This book, e.g., is Gospel for me, toy for the baby. It is both "other" only in relationship to a self, and such-and-such a kind of other only as perceived by the self.

At the methodological level, objectivity refers to the systematic attempt to exclude error from the process and results of investigation by the proper use of the right techniques. Subjectivity, at this level, is a correlative term when it is used nonpejoratively to refer to the appropriate contribution of the knower to the process and results of investigation.[3] But most often subjectivity is used at the methodological level as a contradictory, pejorative term to refer to the falsifying intrusion of the knower into the process and results of investigation. To say that someone's interpretation of a text is highly subjective is not a commendation.

Later I will presuppose this distinction among the uses of these two terms at the three different levels to stake out a fourth use, a hermeneutical one; but at this point we must attend for a moment to the real nature of positivism. Positivism involves an uncritical reduction of the three quite different meanings of objectivity to a single meaning dictated by the concerns of method. For positivism, only that which can be obtained by the proper use of method is, or can be known to be, true and thus real. Since method can be applied only to objects which are in some sense quantifiable, positivism limits the scope of the real to the material or quasi-material.[4]

The physical sciences under the influence of post-Newtonian physics, the behavioral sciences under the influence of post-Freudian psychological theory, and the historical disciplines under the influence of post-Diltheyan philosophy have moved well beyond the positivistic approach to their respective subject matters. However, it seems to me that the temptation of biblical criticism, especially Roman Catholic criticism, to

[2] This recognition of the priority of subjectivity in the knowledge process, though rooted in the epistemological theory of I. Kant, emerged fully in the early work of M. Heidegger. From another point of view, M. Polanyi, in his theory of "personal knowledge," arrives at the same recognition.

[3] See M. Polanyi and H. Prosch, "Personal Knowledge," in *Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1975) 22–45, for a succinct presentation of Polanyi's contribution on this point.

[4] Of course, the term "method" can be legitimately expanded to refer to investigative procedures which are not quantitative. However, the notion of method to which H.-G. Gadamer contrasts the notion of truth (*Truth and Method* [New York: Seabury, 1975]) and which Polanyi (ibid. 25–26) holds responsible for the current drift toward nihilism is scientific method, whose ideal is the exhaustive description of reality as matter in motion.

slip into a quasi-positivistic approach to the text has never been fully overcome, perhaps partly because the sources of the temptation have not been recognized.

I suspect that there are two main sources of the positivistic seduction for the biblical critic, one historical and one disciplinary. The historical source is the convergence of two factors. First, Roman Catholic biblical scholars, once freed from ecclesiastical shackles in the 1940's,[5] entered the field of contemporary biblical scholarship at the methodological level. The prodigious effectiveness of the methods being used by their Protestant colleagues not only recommended the methods but also precluded as unnecessary any in-depth investigation of their hermeneutical underpinnings. The problem, however, was that critical Protestant scholarship was operating out of a hermeneutical theory that had not undergone any serious re-evaluation since Schleiermacher (1768–1834). Biblical hermeneutics remained essentially that of nineteenth-century romanticist historicism, while the historical disciplines themselves moved on into the twentieth century under the influence of the emerging historical consciousness.[6]

Secondly, almost all of the original generation of Catholic critical scholars (virtually all clerics) had been educated in the scholastic version of Thomism, which was regarded as not only a valid philosophical system but the only true one. Few of these scholars had had the opportunity to come to grips seriously with the Kantian epistemological revolution, much less with the emergence of phenomenology through the work of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger. In other words, Catholic biblical scholars were hermeneutically equipped with a nineteenth-century historicist methodology operating within the framework of a precritical Aristotelian epistemology. It was not until Bultmann unveiled his program of demythologization that the hermeneutical question was reopened in all seriousness.[7] However, the threat to faith discerned in Bultmann's position on the historical Jesus obscured, at least for Catholics, the real importance of his enterprise of reasking the hermeneutical question from the standpoint of contemporary philosophical thought and in the context of twentieth-century historical consciousness. Catholic biblical criticism was

[5] Cf. T. A. Collins and R. E. Brown, "Church Pronouncements," *JBC* 72:13–36, pp. 627–32.

[6] Of particular importance for the development of modern historical theory was the work of W. Dilthey (1833–1911), E. Troeltsch (1865–1929), and R. G. Collingwood (1889–1934).

[7] For an excellent treatment of the development, context, and content of R. Bultmann's thought, see A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), esp. chaps. 8–10. *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958) is Bultmann's own presentation of his project of demythologization.

amply employed mining the rich lodes opened to it by the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu*,[8] and so the Continental conversation over the New Hermeneutics remained a largely Protestant, theological concern.[9] Epistemologically, the subject/object dichotomy of Aristotelian realism remained unquestioned, as did the methodological ideal of objectivity in its quasi-positivist sense.

The disciplinary source of the positivistic seduction, I think, comes from the fact that exegetes have assigned themselves two closely intertwined tasks which are actually quite different but have not often been distinguished. First, there is the task of supplying biblical information about first-century Christian thought and practice for use in the negotiation of current church problems. It has been very important to theology, for example, to know with practical certitude that there is more than one Christology in the NT and that the belief in the divinity of Jesus was a progressive acquisition in the earliest communities,[10] and that John and Paul had different theologies of the Resurrection.[11] It is crucial for the contemporary discussion of ministry in the Church to know that there were several kinds of church order during the NT period,[12] that Jesus did not ordain the twelve apostles priests,[13] that Mary Magdalene fulfilled all the Pauline and Lukan qualifications for apostleship,[14] and that the NT does not tell us who presided at the Eucharist in the early Church.[15]

[8] Pius XII, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, Sept 30, 1943 (*AAS* 35 [1943] 297–326)

[9] A concise presentation of this discussion is available in *The New Hermeneutic*, ed J M Robinson and J B Cobb, Jr (New York Harper & Row, 1964)

[10] See, e g, R E Brown, "'Who Do Men Say That I Am?' A Survey of Modern Scholarship in Gospel Christology," *Biblical Reflections on Crises Facing the Church* (New York Paulist, 1975) 20–37, and his still valuable *Jesus, God and Man Modern Biblical Reflections* (Milwaukee Bruce, 1967) The plethora of recent Christologies by such eminent theologians as E Schillebeeckx, H Kung, W Kasper, W Pannenberg, and J Moltmann bears eloquent witness to the plurisignative value of the NT data

[11] I am not, of course, implying substantial difference between the two NT writers concerning either the fact or the salvific significance of the Resurrection, but rather calling attention to the difference between Paul's kenotic interpretation of the paschal mystery and John's glorification theology

[12] See E Schillebeeckx, *Ministry Leadership in the Community of Jesus Christ* (New York Crossroad, 1981) 5–37

[13] R E Brown, *Priest and Bishop Biblical Reflections* (New York Paulist, 1970) 13–20, E Schussler Fiorenza, "The Twelve," *Women Priests A Catholic Commentary on the Vatican Declaration*, ed L Swidler and A Swidler (New York Paulist, 1977) 114–22, T P Rausch, "Ordination and the Ministry Willed by Jesus," ibid 123–31, *Women and Priestly Ministry The New Testament Evidence*, a report by the Task Force on the Role of Women in Early Christianity, *CBQ* 41 (1979) 608–13

[14] E Schussler Fiorenza, "The Apostleship of Women in Early Christianity," *Women Priests* 135–40, S Schneiders, "The Apostleship of Women in John's Gospel," *Catholic Charismatic* 1 (1977) 16–20

[15] See Brown, *Priest and Bishop* 40–42

This type of data is the result of predominantly, and legitimately, positive investigation. It does not actually seek to interpret the NT text itself but to extract from it information which is in the text, to be sure, but which it is not the real purpose of the Gospel to communicate. The goal of this type of informational, or positive, research is to arrive at the literal sense of the text on the matters in question.[16] If the investigation is carried out with proper methodological rigor, the results are fairly univocal and the same results should be able to be attained by independent researchers working correctly on the same texts. Furthermore, the result of such research should commend itself as simply correct to anyone who can follow the presentation of the data. In this enterprise of digging out historical information about the theological positions and actual practices of the early Church, historical-critical exegesis is fully vindicated as an autonomous discipline. The clarity and solidity of its results tend to make this type of exegesis seem paradigmatic for biblical research, and this leads to the tendency to see historical criticism as a completely adequate method for all interpretation. Thus the tendency toward historical positivism, toward equating all biblical interpretation with positive historical research and regarding any results not obtainable or verifiable by historical-critical method as spurious.

But there is a second task of exegesis which is quite different from this positive historical task, namely, participation in the work of interpreting the text as the Church's normative source of revelation.[17] The purpose of this kind of interpretation is not to extract historical information from the text but to understand what the Gospel testimony means—in other words, to allow the text to become word of God in the community of believers. Here the question is not, for example, to establish factually whether Mary Magdalene actually appears in John's Gospel as an apostle in the technical sense of the term but to understand what the Easter proclamation "I ascend to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (Jn 20:17) really means. What does the symbol "resurrection" convey?

It is in this second area, the truly interpretive one, that the unacceptability of equating exegesis, in the narrow sense of pure historical criticism aimed at uncovering the literal sense of the text, with the biblical enterprise as a whole is becoming evident. The limits of historical criti-

[16] I am using the term "literal sense" as it has come to be understood among modern critical exegetes, i.e., to denote the sense of the text intended by the sacred author and understood by the original audience.

[17] I have attempted to describe this ecclesial interpretive task and the biblical scholar's participation in it at some length in "Freedom: Response and Responsibility: The Vocation of the Biblical Scholar in the Church," *Whither Creativity, Freedom, Suffering?: Humanity, Cosmos, God*, ed. F. A. Eigo (Villanova: Villanova Univ., 1981) 25–52.

cism, considered as an exhaustive method, are appearing on two fronts, the philosophical and the literary. On the one hand, the epistemological and ontological questions of what it means to interpret and to understand as opposed to gathering information are being raised.[18] On the other hand, literary questions regarding the whole range of expressive or symbolic language[19] and the functioning of such megaforms as narrative and such subgenres as parable are emerging.[20] And in the background is the increasingly vocal discontent of many, within and outside the biblical academy, who, for good reasons and bad, are decrying the religious sterility of much exegetical production.[21]

My contention is that the foundational work that needs to be done is the elaboration of a full-scale, nonreductive hermeneutical theory that would include both the philosophical and the literary dimensions and within which historical-critical exegesis would be properly seen as an indispensable moment in the full interpretive process. To support this contention and give some idea of what such a theory might look like, I would like now to sketch out, in two parts, one general and one specific, the dimensions of such a theory, thereby also indicating some of the problems that need to be addressed.

HERMENEUTICAL THEORY IN GENERAL

In this part of the paper I will explore the general problematic of textual interpretation, leaving the special question of NT interpretation for the final part. The hermeneutical task consists in interpreting a text in order to understand it. These three words—interpret, text, and under-

[18] Particularly important in this discussion are the works of Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, and P. Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian Univ., 1976) and *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. L. S. Mudge (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).

[19] Cf. P. Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ., 1962); N. Perrin, *Jesus and the Language of the Kingdom: Symbol and Metaphor in New Testament Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

[20] Cf. A. N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ., 1964); M. A. Tolbert, *Perspectives on the Parables: An Approach to Multiple Interpretations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), and the ongoing work of J. D. Crossan, R. W. Funk, and D. O. Via.

[21] Still the most articulate and provocative work of this genre is the little essay of W. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation: Toward a New Paradigm for Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973). The fundamentalist critique is well articulated by G. Maier, *The End of the Historical-Critical Method* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1977). His position is effectively criticized by P. Stuhlmacher, *Historical Criticism and Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Towards a Hermeneutics of Consent* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 66–71.

stand—mark out the philosophical dimensions of an adequate hermeneutical theory.

Text

The NT is, first of all, a text, that is, written discourse. Consequently, one dimension of an adequate hermeneutical theory is the philosophy of language as it contributes to our understanding of text as a linguistic entity and the consequences of such understanding for interpretation. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur has contributed perhaps the most enlightening reflections on the nature of written discourse.[22] While it is not possible even to summarize briefly his analysis of text, we can point to his central insight, namely, that the text is not simply the transcription, the fixing in writing, of oral discourse. It is not conversation written down, and therefore the dialogue is not the proper model for understanding a text. The text, says Ricoeur, begins where the dialogue ends. Writing creates a new kind of being, a being which originated in an event, the act of composition, but which perdures as ideal meaning, that is, as meaning liberated from its originating event and capable of being reactualized in new ways in subsequent events of understanding. Meaning's survival of its originating event has several consequences which directly affect the project of interpretation.

First, the text becomes, in Ricoeur's terms, semantically independent of the intention of its author. It now means whatever it means, and all that it can mean, regardless of whether or not the author intended that meaning. Indeed, as Ricoeur points out, the intention of the author is no longer available to us in any case. Furthermore, as we shall see later, it is of the very nature of truly great texts to be characterized by a certain excess of meaning that could not have been part of the intention of the author.[23]

Secondly, the text is now referentially independent of its originating circumstances. The NT text is no longer exclusively about the world of first-century Palestine. Rather, it projects a world, the world of Christian discipleship, into which it invites readers of succeeding generations to enter. The contemporary meaning of the text, in other words, is not something added on to a basic literal meaning. It is intrinsic to the meaning of the text.[24]

Thirdly, the text is no longer determined in meaning by the understand-

[22] This synopsis of Ricoeur's theory of text is derived from *Interp. Theory* 25–44.

[23] The notion of "surplus of meaning" is also found in Gadamer's theory of the "classic," to be discussed below.

[24] It is precisely here that the inadequacy of the notion of literal sense as defined in n. 16 above appears.

ing of its original audience. The interpretations of succeeding generations with different concerns and capacities for understanding can have as much claim to validity as do the interpretations of the original audience.[25] The understanding of the original audience, in other words, is not exhaustive of the meaning of the text.

Fourthly, the text embodies its meaning in some literary genre which operates in such a way as to engage the reader, cognitively and affectively, in certain quite determining ways. Literary genre, in other words, is not just a tool for classifying texts; it is, above all, a strategy for total reader involvement with the subject matter of the text.

As interpreters of a text, says Ricoeur, our business is primarily with the meaning of the text, not with the event of composition, although for other reasons, to be discussed later, the circumstances of composition can be very important. Meaning, says Ricoeur, is a dialectic of sense, that is, the propositional content of the text or what the text says, and reference, that is, the text's truth claims, what the text is about.

Different methods and processes enter into the interpretation of the text, but they are all determined by the very nature of the text as linguistic entity, that is, as a mediation of meaning to be achieved as event, and not the dead relic of an earlier event nor a window into the mind of the author or the understanding of a first-century audience.

Interpretation

We turn now to the question of interpretation, which engages us with a second dimension of an adequate hermeneutical theory, the contribution of epistemology or the theory of knowledge. Again, Paul Ricoeur has made perhaps the most useful contribution to this area of our inquiry in his explanation of interpretation as a dialectic, ever more finely mediated, between explanation and comprehension.[26] In this area also it is impossible even to summarize Ricoeur's thought. But the kernel of it can at least be indicated.

Ricoeur says that precisely because a text is cut off from its author, because it is, so to speak, mute, the process of interpretation begins in a guess. The interpreter construes the verbal meaning of the text out of his or her preunderstanding, in the Heideggerian sense of that term. The text is first construed as a whole by a reciprocal, circular process of attending to the unity and then to the details that compose that unity. Secondly,

[25] In the case of the NT, it is not the same thing to say that successive interpretations have as much claim to *validity* and that successive interpretations have as much claim to *normativity*.

[26] Ricoeur, *Interp. Theory* 80–88; P. Ricoeur, "Explanation and Understanding," *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. C. E. Reagan and D. Stewart (Boston: Beacon, 1978) 149–66.

the text is construed as an individual, a singular example which belongs to a particular class of texts within a particular literary genre, and so on. Thirdly, a text which, as in the case of the Gospels, for example, is largely metaphorical and symbolic in its language and therefore susceptible of a plurality of valid interpretations must be construed within one of its several horizons of meaning. This process of intelligent guessing, for which finally there can be no real rules, leads to some global comprehension of the text which must then be validated.

Validation, according to Ricoeur, is the explanatory phase of the interpretive dialectic. While it would be inaccurate to speak of empirical verification in the sphere of interpretation, it is quite accurate to speak of scientific validation according to a logic of probability established by a method of converging indices. This is, indeed, precisely the kind of scientific knowledge appropriate to the study of an individual (which a text is) as opposed to a class.

To these explanatory procedures of validation are joined procedures of invalidation which exploit the potentialities of conflicting interpretations to show comparatively how and why one interpretation is superior to others. As Ricoeur says:

> An interpretation must not only be probable, but more probable than another interpretation. There are criteria of relative superiority for resolving this conflict which can be easily derived from the logic of subjective probability . . . If it is true that there is always more than one way of construing a text, it is not true that all interpretations are equal. The text presents a limited field of possible constructions. The logic of validation allows us to move between the two limits of dogmatism and scepticism. It is always possible to argue for or against an interpretation, to confront interpretations, to arbitrate between them and to seek agreement, even if this agreement remains beyond our immediate reach.[27]

Perhaps one of the major methodological problems that will have to be faced as a renewed hermeneutical theory is developed is that of the criteria of validity in the interpretation of texts which are frankly admitted to be plurisignative by nature and therefore intrinsically susceptible of multiple interpretations, and even of several valid interpretations.[28]

Understanding

We turn finally to the ontological dimension of an adequate hermeneutical theory, the problem of how we are to understand the goal of interpretation, understanding itself as it applies to texts. In this area the major contemporary contribution has been made by Hans-Georg Gada-

[27] Ricoeur, *Interp. Theory* 75–79, at 79.

[28] Tolbert, *Perspectives*, provides one of the best discussions of this issue in her chapter "Guidelines for Interpretation" (67–91). See also Ricoeur, *Interp. Theory* 78–79.

mer in his masterwork *Truth and Method.* Ricoeur is in substantial agreement with Gadamer that understanding finally consists in a fusion of horizons between the world of the reader and the world of the text, in the act of appropriation by which the reader openly engages the reference or truth claims of the text, risking his or her own "world" in the confrontation with the world of the text and surrendering to the truth about the subject matter. Ricoeur speaks of this as an opening of the reader, through the sense of the text, to the truth claims of its reference. Gadamer speaks of it as a coming to grips with the question that gave rise to the text through the text's response to that question in a challenging process by which we finally come to the truth about the subject matter of the text and surrender to it.[29] For both, what is understood is not the world behind the text but the world that the text projects, the possibilities for existence that the text opens out for the reader. For both, understanding is not a purely cognitive matter, and certainly not a mere collection of new information. It is a change in one's way of being in the world, a conversion.[30]

It is precisely here that we must again raise the question of objectivity. At the hermeneutical level objectivity refers to the reader's full submission to the truth claims that the meaning of the text makes upon one as it is progressively actualized in the event of understanding. Subjectivity is that personal authenticity which comes from the new self-understanding which is given to us by and through our understanding of the text. Thus objectivity and subjectivity coincide in the act of appropriation of meaning in which understanding is achieved as event.[31]

THE CENTRAL PROBLEM OF NEW TESTAMENT HERMENEUTICS

In this final section we turn from the general question of interpretation as it applies to any text to the specific question of NT interpretation, which is much more complex. The special complexity of the problem, as far as I can see, arises from the peculiar character of the NT text, which is, *mutatis mutandis,* also that of the OT, but I do not wish to engage the larger field at this point. The NT text has a single sense but a double reference. The reference of the NT is both to a "world behind the text," the events of the life, preaching, and paschal mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, and to a "world in front of the text," the real possibilities for self-understanding and transformation that, when realized, constitute Christian discipleship. The special hermeneutical problem of the NT is how

[29] Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 325–41.

[30] Gadamer, ibid. 341. See also H.-G. Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," *Philosophical Hermeneutics,* (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1976) 104.

[31] Ricoeur, *Interp. Theory* 91–92.

these two references are related to each other and thus how they can be adequately handled in a valid and fruitful process of interpretation.

Let us explore, first, the historical reference. Somehow the NT text refers to a real historical individual, Jesus of Nazareth, what he did and what he said, how he died and whether that was the end of his story. Unlike the play *Hamlet*, which would not be at all impoverished if there never had been a Danish court or a melancholic prince, the Gospel is completely dependent for its religious significance on the real existence of Jesus, because what it asserts and what the Church believes is that God actually and definitively revealed Godself to us in Jesus Christ. Hence, if there was no Jesus, we are, of all people, the most totally deluded. And if the NT is not a faithful account of him, we are, at best, radically misled concerning the content of revelation, if not about the fact.

Now, obviously, the concern of the biblical scholar with the historical reference of the text does not arise from the possibility that if we, as scholars, could not establish that reference or its reliability, the Church would have no sure foundation for its faith.[32] The Church's faith, fortunately, rests on the testimony of the apostles, not on the erudition of scholars. The reason the biblical scholar is concerned with the historical reference of the text is because the ideal meaning of the text, which is what we seek to actualize as understanding by interpretation, consists in the dialectic between the sense of the text (what it says) and its reference (what it is about). What the text is about is God's real, historical self-revelation in the person of Jesus, which becomes really accessible to us through the inspired text. It is the historical reality of Jesus which actually creates and founds the existential possibility of discipleship which the text projects before it.[33] The historical reference, in other words, is essential to, although not coterminous with, the ideal meaning of the text, which involves both the historical and the existential reference.

We will now momentarily suspend the question of how to deal with the historical reference of the text and explore the existential reference, the

[32] It was precisely this concern which led Bultmann to his radical position on the nonimportance of historical data about Jesus. Bultmann thought that faith had to be liberated from dependence on the unstable results of historical scholarship and based firmly on the transcendent relation between divine address and human decisional response. For an excellent appreciative and critical evaluation of Bultmann's position, see Thiselton, *Two Horizons* 283–92.

[33] It is this realization which led some of Bultmann's most illustrious disciples to inaugurate the "new quest for the historical Jesus." For a summary of the reaction against Bultmann, see R. Latourelle, *Finding Jesus through the Gospels: History and Hermeneutics* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba, 1979) 33–45.

"world which the text projects before itself" as a complex of real possibilities for new self-understanding and thus a transformed way of being in the world.[34] These possibilities can be collectively referred to as discipleship, or as participation in the paschal mystery of Jesus the Christ, or simply as new and eternal life. Our inquiry is about the conditions of possibility of this existential reference.

The question must be answered on two levels, theologically and philosophically. Theologically, the text opens to its "fit readers" the real life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The text is revelatory because of its real participation in the revelation event of God in Jesus. How the active potentiality of the unique revelatory event of Jesus is carried forward, so to speak, into the text is a question we will return to shortly.

Philosophically, our inquiry into the way the text opens out its world of real possibilities is guided by the work of Gadamer on the nature of a classical text.[35] While it is not possible to summarize Gadamer's thought on this subject, we can note the two essential characteristics of the classic which he has discerned. First, the classic has perennial significance. It survives and flourishes as its contemporaries pass into oblivion or become period pieces. The reason for its perennial quality is that the classic deals with matters of such human importance, and deals with them with such abundance of truth and beauty, that the classic remains vitally important for people of succeeding ages. Humanity does not outgrow the questions with which a classic deals, nor the way in which it addresses those questions. In his explanation of "effective historical consciousness,"[36] Gadamer discusses how the ongoing participation of people in succeeding generations in the tradition which produced the classic both supplies the necessary preunderstanding for these people to re-engage the subject matter of the classic, and also assures that that re-engagement will be always new as later generations bring new questions, concerns, and perspectives to their dialogue with the text.

The second characteristic of the classic is its "excess of meaning," the richness of the ideal meaning which allows for a theoretically unlimited number of actualizations, each being somewhat original and different from the others. Thus, says Gadamer, it is not just sometimes the case, but always the case, that the classic means more than its author intended or could have intended; for understanding, i.e., the event of meaning, is

[34] Cf. Ricoeur, *Interp. Theory* 37.

[35] Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 253–58. D. Tracy, in *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) has put Gadamer's notion of the classic to work as a fundamental theological category.

[36] Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 267–74, 305–25.

precisely the actualization of the ideal meaning by the act of interpretation.[37]

The theory of the classic helps to explain, at the philosophical level, the phenomenon of Christian experience with the New Testament. It is ever new, inexhaustibly revelatory. The philosophical notion of the classic corresponds to the theological category of revelation, which is not a static conceptual content but the self-gift of the living God.

Having sketched the dimensions of each of the two references of the NT text, the historical and the existential, we turn now to the baffling question of how the two references come together in the interpretation of the text. My reflections at this point are more a pointing in the direction of a response than the proposing of an answer. It seems that we can start by recognizing that the normative instance of the fusion of the two horizons, that of the historical Jesus and that of potential disciples, is the appropriation of the meaning of Jesus by the first generation of Christians.

In them the life of Jesus became the mystery of Christ under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Their experience of being baptized into Christ, of Christ in them as hope of glory, of living no longer as themselves but of Christ living in them, of being in Christ and he in them,[38] in short, of really participating through his paschal mystery in eternal life, was the experience of transformation according to the new self-understanding and possibilities of existence that became available to them in Jesus. In hermeneutical terms, the objective coincidence of the ideal meaning of the Jesus event, and their own subjectivity, constituted their conversion. I suggest that what I like to call "the paschal, or Christian, imagination" is precisely the concrete effect on the whole cognitive-affective capacity of the person under the influence of the Spirit of Jesus which enables the person to grasp the paschal wholeness and character of the Jesus event and thus enter into an existential participation in the mystery of Christ.[39] These first Christians exercised their paschal imagination in giving witness, the witness we have as the NT text. I suspect that the emergence and exercise of the paschal imagination in the production of the text as witness comes close to what we mean by the concept of inspiration and that the paschal character of that imagination is what gives the entire text its Easter quality.

Witness, the witness character of the text, is the operative category in

[37] Ibid. 264.

[38] Cf. Rom 6:3; Gal 3:27; Col 1:27; Gal 2:20; Jn 14:20; 15:4.

[39] Cf. R. Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination: Toward an Ontology and a Rhetoric of Revelation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) chap. 5, esp. 208–18.

bringing together the historical and existential references of the text in the act of interpretation. The historical Jesus, the world behind the text, is available only in the witness to Christ, which is precisely what projects a world of possibilities in front of the text, the existential reference. The coincidence of the world behind the text and the world in front of the text is the work of mediation accomplished by the text.

An adequate theory of this coincidence would supply important suggestions about the nature and process of valid and fruitful interpretation. Such a theory would have at least three dimensions: the theological, the aesthetic, and the literary.

Theologically, one would have to explore the notion of revelation as it relates to the NT text. I suspect that such exploration would lead toward the affirmation that it is inspiration, operative in the witness contained in the text, which makes the text a locus of revelation. In other words, the inspired witness encountered by the fit interpreter is for that reader what the life of the historical Jesus was for his disciples under the influence of the Spirit, namely, revelation or the self-communication of God in new life.[40] This amounts to saying that the coincidence of the historical and the existential reference in the text constitutes the sacramentality of the text, its incarnation character.

At the level of aesthetic theory, two thinkers are particularly useful for our inquiry, Gadamer and Ray Hart. The NT is not only a classic but an art object. I do not want to become embroiled in the old argument about whether it is primitive art, folk art, or fine art, but simply to recognize that it is the use of imaginative, first-order language to present the truth as beautiful, that is, as appealing to the whole person in a profoundly unitary and unifying way.

As art object, the NT text has what Hart calls an "intermittent mode of being."[41] The art object, product of the imagination of the artist, is a work of art in the act of creation, but once created it "lapses," so to speak, into an inferior mode of existence as art object until it is again perceived by a fit viewer, until it is actualized by contemplation, which is constitutive of the being of the work of art. Only in the aesthetic experience does

[40] It seems to me that this is the meaning of the closing claim of John's Gospel (20:30–31) that the "writing" that the Gospel is constitutes a potentially faith-evoking contact with the salvific reality of Jesus, a contact substantially identical with that which occurred through the historical signs of the Word made flesh. I have developed this theological interpretation more fully in "Symbolism and the Sacramental Principle in the Fourth Gospel," *Segni e sacramenti nel Vangelo di Giovanni*, ed. P.-R. Tragan (Rome: Editrice Anselmiana, 1977) 221–35, and in "History and Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel," *L'Evangile de Jean: Sources, rédaction, théologie*, ed. M. de Jonge (Gembloux: Duculot, 1977) 371–76.

[41] Cf. Hart, *Unfinished Man* 256–64, on which this paragraph is dependent.

the art object become the work of art, the mediation of truth as beauty. In a very real way we can say that the NT text, as revelation, has an intermittent mode of existence. Only when it is actually interacting with the paschal imagination in the act of appropriation of meaning is it revelation. There is truth, in other words, in the evangelical insistence that only as kerygma, as proclaimed and heard, is the Gospel truly Gospel.

The Gadamerian contribution to our inquiry is his analogy of the game for understanding the work of art.[42] The game is a world into which the players enter. They actualize the game according to its ideal structure, namely, the rules. Only in being played does it truly exist, and yet its ideal objectivity is not created by the players but submitted to by them. According to Gadamer, this is the way a text "works." It is we who interpret, who actualize the text. But it is finally the text, into whose structure of objective meaning we enter, which interprets us. Or more exactly, our interpretation is objective to the extent that our subjectivity is enhanced by the hold of its meaning upon us.

Finally, at the level of literary theory, it is the recent work of thinkers such as Philip Wheelwright, Ray Hart, Amos Wilder, and Paul Ricoeur on depth language in general and symbol, metaphor, and myth in particular which will be particularly helpful in understanding the coincidence of the historical and the existential references in the text.[43] What so frustrates the exegete whose research concern is exclusively historical is precisely that which delights the religious interpreter, namely, the near absence of second-order, conceptual language, or what Wheelwright calls "steno-language," in the New Testament. The notion of steno-language is a limit concept for the approach of conceptual language toward the pole of univocity, one-to-one correspondence between term and concept. The whole spectrum of language toward the other pole he calls expressive or depth language. This is language which is essentially plurisignative, because it conveys the truth precisely in and by its evocation of feeling. It is language whose impact is simultaneously cognitive and affective.[44] Thus, according to Hart, it is first-order language, the language of imagination in the strong sense which we have been giving to that term.

[42] Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 91–119.

[43] P. Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain: A Study in the Language of Symbolism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ., 1968), as well as *Metaphor and Reality* (n. 19 above); A. N. Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), as well as *Early Christian Rhetoric* (n. 20 above); P. Ricoeur, "Creativity in Language" and "Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics," *Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* 120–33 and 134–48, as well as *Interp. Theory* 45–69.

[44] Cf. Wheelwright, *Burning Fountain* 32–55; *Metaphor and Reality* 45–69; Hart, *Unfinished Man* 218–19.

This is why the text must be read not just with the critical intelligence but with the whole mind and heart, that is, with the imagination in full operation.

CONCLUSION

Let me finally draw just two general conclusions about the hermeneutical project as such a general theory would project it. The first is that an adequate hermeneutical theory would make it clear that there are three fatally mistaken approaches to the NT text. One is the attempt to separate sense from reference and deal only with the sense, i.e., with what the text says. This can only terminate in the abstractions of a solipsistic form of structuralism. The second is the attempt to attend separately or exclusively to the historical reference. This can, of course, be done; indeed, it often is. And it can supply a certain amount of more or less useful information. But such information is lifeless and thus spiritually sterile, however academically useful, and while its pursuit saps the imaginative energy of the researcher, it bores the people of God (and not infrequently other scholars as well). The third mistaken approach is the attempt to attend separately or exclusively to the existential reference. Again, this can be and often is done. And it sometimes produces edifying results. But it easily leads to eisegesis, sentimentality, or fundamentalism; for it has cut the nerve of historical revelation.

Hence my second conclusion: the approach to NT interpretation which seems to hold out the promise of being both valid and fruitful, both faithful and creative, is a dialectical approach in which the interpreter moves, through ever finer mediations, between the pole of explanation by means of literary and historical-critical exegesis, and the pole of understanding by means of theological-spiritual sensitivity. It is the paschal imagination which guides this dialectic toward that hermeneutical objectivity which is the transformation of the interpreter by the coming-to-event of the text as word of God.