

IMAGINATION AND TRANSFORMATION: RICOEUR AND THE ROLE OF IMAGINATION

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Abstract

The article examines the facilitating role of imagination in the process of transformation. Firstly, the suspicion that imagination is merely a license for subjectivity is addressed, before the phenomenological roots of imagination and its radical redefinition by Husserl are retraced. This serves as background for the main part of the article, which consists of a discussion of the substantial contribution of Ricoeur. In a final section, the role of the imagination is illustrated by a brief analysis of the figure of Abraham in Galatians and the parable of the labourers in the vineyard.

Introduction

Under the theme 'When contexts meet', the group is continuing its exploration of the dynamics of contextual hermeneutics. Such a meeting of contexts (of individuals or interpretive communities) may have very limited consequences, but it could also set in motion a fundamental transformation. In that case, not only the discourse is affected, but wider issues arise. These include the need for and the nature of translation required to facilitate the transformation and inevitably the question of continuity, of integrity and of identity. Exploring and understanding these issues are not only important in their own right, but the group has a special interest in the consequences of these developments for the way in which theology and religion are taught.

Against this background, the present contribution attempts to explore a very specific aspect of transformation, namely the role of imagination. It is a role which is often misunderstood or underestimated, but which can make the difference between transformation becoming stultified or retaining its momentum.

The fluidity of a society in transition manifests itself in different ways. For our purposes, two aspects are of special importance - the issue of identity and of continuity. As far as the first is concerned, the so-called New Social Movement Theory (Melucci 1988) offers illuminating insights. This approach, interested in the study of social movement across cultures (concentrating on the core manifestations of student, environmental, women and peace movements), underlines the preference of these movements for small-scale, decentralized organisations, anti-hierarchical in structure and favouring direct democracy. It also highlights the importance of a collective identity. 'Collective identity is an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals and concerned with the orientations of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place: by 'interactive and shared' I mean a definition that

must be conceived as a process, because it is constructed and negotiated through a repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals' (Melucci 1988: 342).

Religion often plays a crucial role in forming these identities, as highlighted by several research projects - c.f. Cumpsty and Hofmeyr (cf. Oosthuizen et al 1985) and the work of Clarke on new religious movements. But religion itself is in a state of flux. Traditional privileges, established positions, spheres of influence are all challenged, as is evident from debates on media time for religion, religion in school curriculum, the role and influence of theologians in public affairs and many others.

Against this background, the aim of this contribution is to concentrate on the facilitating role of imagination in the process of transformation. In order to do this, the suspicion that imagination is merely a license for subjectivity, must first be addressed. One strand of philosophical thought will therefore be re-examined below, namely the phenomenological roots of imagination and its radical redefinition by Husserl. This serves as background for the substantial contribution of Ricoeur, and his 'linguistic turn'. In a final section, the role of imagination is illustrated by a brief analysis of the figure of Abraham in Galatians and of the parable of the labourers hired at different times.

A renewed Interest in Imagination

Through the centuries, the concept of imagination, its nature, function and creative potential has fascinated philosophers, artists, writers, historians, psychologists and many others (cf Engell 1981)¹. The encyclopedic study of Eva Brann (1991) illustrates the vastness of the field. She distinguishes at least six major areas: philosophy, psychology, logic, literature, visual arts and world-making. Driven by the 'mystery and neglect' of this topic by philosophers - which is all the more remarkable in view of the growing interest in the subject by cognitive psychology and the role of imagination in all forms of art, especially literature - Brann offers a remarkably comprehensive treatment of the subject. The present contribution deals only with a tiny segment of this encompassing field of study, related to certain philosophical and theological insights, but more especially to what Brann calls 'world-making'.

While imagination always was an important concept in literary theory and in reflection on the arts, it is only recently that it has gained prominence in theology. This is especially the case in North American theology, where studies like Tracy's *The analogical imagination* is indicative of this interest. Various other studies underline its importance. David Bryant refers to the seminal role of Amos Wilder, but also more recent work by Stroup, Hart, McFague, Lindbeck, Thiemann and Ricoeur. His own study on *Faith and the play of imagination* takes its cue from what Bryant perceives to be an inadequacy in Gordon Kaufman's concept of imagination. Imagination should not be understood as the epistemological ground for human knowledge, but as a dimension of the historicity of human life. In this way, a correlation between faith and human existence is assumed, presupposing

1 I gratefully acknowledge the generous assistance of Prof Dirkie Smit in making available literature and information on the topic of imagination.

'that an understanding of the operation of the imagination in human life in general will provide some basic insights into the nature of faith as an imaginative venture' (1989:5).

According to Garrett Green, the recent theological interest in imagination does not signal a new theological programme or method. Rather, it offers 'a clue to the cultural and historical location of religion and thus to the nature of the theological enterprise itself' (1989:9). In the on-going dialogue/confrontation between religion and science, there is a need for 'mediating theologians'. For them, imagination becomes an extremely important concept - in fact, 'theologians in this mediating tradition characteristically interpret religion as imagination' (1989:12). As part of this wider enterprise, Green wants to make a constructive contribution to Christian theology that respects its contemporary context in religious studies. He therefore chooses imagination as the focal point in an attempt to promote a dialogue between theology and religious studies - a dialogue which respects the different function and nature of the two disciplines. His contention is 'that conceiving the point of contact between divine revelation and human experience in terms of imagination allows us to acknowledge the priority of grace in the divine-human relationship while at the same time allowing its dynamics to be described in analytical and comparative terms as a human religious phenomenon' (1989:4).

Earlier studies on imagination include the collection of essays edited by Charles Winquist under the title *The archeology of the imagination* (1981), while the *Semeia* 60 volume on *Fantasy and the Bible* (1992) is devoted to a related, but also very different topic. These collections illustrate how wide-spread the interest in imagination has become. But is this a useful category for the interpretation of biblical material?

The Case against Imagination

Using the concept of *imagination* in a discussion of the interpretation of biblical material is not without risks. Imagination is under suspicion if not direct attack from at least two quarters. On the one hand, opposition comes from the naturalist conviction that imagination starts where facts, data, historical evidence end. In the context of our own interpretive community of biblical scholars, for some members the most damning comment to make about the exegetical endeavours of a colleague is: 'Er/sie lässt es sich *einfallen*' or 'Er/sie *bildet* es sich ein'. Rooted in the subject/object dichotomy underlying most variations of the historical paradigm, opting for imagination is the worst sin. It is a sure sign of not being willing to submit oneself to the rigours of the trade and the cop-out of those unable to stand the heat of the exegetical kitchen. We should not underestimate the intensity of the feeling against imagination.

On the other hand, imagination is under attack from exponents of post-modernism, who see in the emphasis on imagination traces of a (mistaken) ideal to save the human subject as a separate entity and of an (anachronistic) attempt to retain humanist imagination as the ultimate source or meaning. Imagery is considered to be at worst a narcissistic illusion and at best a parody of other images, of which none can claim to be the original.

Introducing the issue of imagination in the present context is therefore bound to raise suspicion and to provoke resistance. One should therefore be very clear about what is exactly meant by this concept. In order to do this, it is important to say something about the reintroduction and reinterpretation of imagination by phenomenology and especially by Husserl, who laid the foundations of what was to follow later.

The Contribution of Phenomenology

The most important contribution of phenomenology was to restore imagination to respectability by showing that the image is not a *thing in* consciousness, but an *act of* consciousness. Up to that point, imagination and images had a bad name, being understood as something secondary, as copies or imitations of the original and the real. As Richard Kearney shows (and of whose analysis I make liberal use²), traditional theories since Plato stigmatised imagination under three headings: '(1) *dualism* - images were generally considered allies of the lower corporeal order and thus inimical to the elevated pursuits of the intellect; (2) *representationalism* - images were construed as mere copies of our sensible experience; and (3) *reification* - images were treated as quasi-material things (*res*) in the mind rather than acts of living consciousness' (13).

The cause of imagination (at least in the eyes of its opponents) was not helped by German idealism and not even Kant succeeded in restoring a productive role to imagination. It was only when phenomenology reintroduced the question of the relationship between consciousness and world that it became possible to develop a new appreciation for imagination. The resistance to imagination was rooted deeply and securely in the traditional subject/object dichotomy and in the naturalist assumption that all modes of consciousness are reducible to empirical data, that is, data conforming to the standards of the natural sciences. In this understanding, images are imprints in the mind of already existing entities. They are therefore secondary by nature, unable to alter anything either of the image or of its origin. The only question of importance is to what extent the image conforms to its original (Is it a true copy?). Being a *copy*, it can only be of inferior status. A negative evaluation of the image and of imagination is inevitable.

Furthermore, traditional models understood images as (secondary) *things* in the mind. This led to a confusion with thoughts and perceptions on the one hand, but also made it impossible to recognise images for what they are. As long as they are endowed with sensory content as objects in themselves, they are subject to the laws of things. As images *of* they can only be of a derived nature and exist only by grace of and in relation to the original.

Husserl challenged this train of thought in a fundamental way. He did this by revealing the image as an *intentional* structure and not as a *part* of human thought which can be isolated and analysed on its own. But this also implies that the current understanding of thought processes and the order in which they occur, has to be revised. The image does not *follow*, but makes it possible for us to see in the

2 Numbers in brackets refer to page numbers to his *Poetics of imagining*, London 1991: HarperCollins.

first place. 'Before one can observe something one must know *what* that something is. Before understanding *how* something exists, one must understand the fundamental essence of the existent' (15). Consequently, Husserl finds the traditional methodological alternatives of either induction or deduction inadequate. Induction implies that the image is construed from within the natural attitude as an object of empirical experimentation. Experience is thereby reduced to what can be observed and collected as data. Deduction, on the other hand, also limits the investigation of imagination by basing it on logical presuppositions.

Imagination should therefore be liberated from the restrictions of traditional thought. The only effective way to do this, according to Husserl, is to insist that the image is not a *thing* at all - neither internal nor external to consciousness. It is a *relation* - an act of consciousness directed to an object beyond consciousness. Imagination cannot reduce the world to a multitude of inner sensations. And 'under no circumstances can the object intended be translated into an image-copy within the mind' (15).

The irrepressible drive of consciousness *beyond* itself, the tendency to move *outside* the confines of language will become important concepts in Ricoeur's views on imagination. Of equal significance is the emphasis on what is *possible*. But the latter presupposes another shift, which enables Husserl to distinguish between perception and imagination. Firstly, both these belong to a intuitive rather than signative mode of intentionality. Signs and to what they refer have no necessary connection, as De Saussure already taught us. But precepts and images are intrinsically connected with the object intended (the image/precept of a horse must resemble a horse). While perceptions deal with reality as it *is*, images deal with reality as it *can* be. By invoking the image of the flute-playing centaur, Husserl concedes that this is a presentation we have ourselves constructed, but denies that is merely something psychic. 'It exists neither in the soul nor in consciousness, nor anywhere else, it is in fact 'nothing', mere 'imagination', or, to be more precise, the living experience of imagination is the imagining of a centaur. To this extent, indeed 'the centaur as intended', the centaur as imagined, belongs to the experience itself as lived' (Husserl, *Ideas* sect 23 as quoted by Kearney 1991: 16-17). Whether this distinction between perception and imagination can be sustained in all its consequences, is doubtful. But, as Kearney explains, it represents an important insight, which was develop further by others. 'To *perceive* my brother and to *imagine* my brother are two different ways of intending the same transcendent object. The intentional precept refers to the same object - my brother - as the intentional image; but the crucial difference is that the first intends him as *real*, the latter as *unreal*. In this way, phenomenology rescues imagination from its 'naturalistic' confusion with perception, and restores it to its essential role as a power capable of intending the unreal *as if* it were real, the absent *as if* it were present, the possible *as if* it were actual. Husserl thus strives to reverse the classical neglect of the unique character of imagination by describing it not as an intermediary storehouse of image-impressions but as a *sui generis* activity of our intentional relation to the world' (17).

Although Husserl was more concerned with perception than with imagination in his own writings, his important contribution for our present purpose is his

emphasis on the priority of what is possible over what is actual. The powers of imagination are indispensable to liberate us from the here-and-now restrictions of perception. For a moment, it enables us to bracket our attitudes to the existent and the non-existent for a moment, in order to penetrate (intuitively) the intention lying behind what we perceive. The process of imagining is therefore not restricted to what is, but considers also what is not or what can be, thus making it possible to discover the new. It is exactly this dialectic between what is and what is not that became the centrepiece of Ricoeur's concept of redescription, as we shall see later.

Restoring the essential relation between consciousness and world is thus achieved by suspending the naturalist prejudice which reduces human experience to empirically observable data and by acknowledging imagination as an indispensable agency for the disclosure and intuition of meaning. Imagination releases things from their contingent status as facts and grants them an ideal status as possibilities. By penetrating in this way the essential nature of things, Husserl hoped it would be possible to open phenomenology to a world of timeless truths. Inevitably, this lend a teleological dimension to his thought. Imagination is understood as 'the indispensable power of intentionality which allows us to move beyond our actual world to the world of possible where we reside as the possibility of total being. In brief, imagination is precisely that which can redeem us from our bonds of particularity by prefiguring the telos of totality' (33).

The essentialism of Husserl and its teleological overtones are not without problems. Although it breaks the bonds of the 'brute fact', it leaves itself open for criticism regarding its transcendental subjectivity. The bracketing of 'reality' and the contingency of my own existence is an essential step to discover the essence of things and of my own ego. But if this is conceived in isolation, without reference to the other, it can lead to a new form of confinement and self-sufficiency, which postpones the return to reality or even make it impossible. The move to the poetic and to fiction is an essential *detour* to gain a new entrance to reality and therefore must lead us *back* to reality if it is to be successful. This point will become even more clear in our discussion of Ricoeur.

Whatever criticism may be leveled at Husserl, there is no doubt that he is responsible for a totally new understanding of imagination. The image is to be understood as an intentional activity, rather than a static representation. This laid the basis for an intentional theory of imagination. Most of all, he restored the concept of imagination to respectability, refuting current notions that it is secondary and derived by nature and revealing it as a liberating and constructive force which opens new possibilities of existence. Paul Ricoeur developed these insights and made them especially useful for textual interpretation, by insisting that imagination is a constitutive part of language.

Ricoeur and the hermeneutical Imagination

Precursors

Other phenomenologists like Satre and Merleau-Ponty took up Husserl's ideas on imagination and developed them further, each in their own way, For our purpose, Gaston Bachelard's concept of a poetical imagination forms an important bridge to

the work of Ricoeur. Starting as a philosopher of science, Bachelard in his later writings concentrated on the origin of creative imagination. The *locus* of the poetic act of creation intrigued him. Where is it to be found? In the human initiative of making? In the matter and form of the thing made? Or in the minds of the recipients themselves? Bachelard thus anticipated much of what was discussed in earlier sessions of our seminar. The key for him was to be found in what he calls in *The poetics of space* (1957) the 'ecstasy of the novelty of the image'. Imagination is the perpetual interaction between the human subject which imagines and the image itself. But in order to be truly creative and to move beyond mere self-fascination, the self-transcendent dimension of imagination must be realised. Imagination has a double intentionality - one material tending towards incarnation and repose, the other dynamic and tending towards disinvestment and unrest. It is exactly this dialectic which lend to imagination its creative power.

Bachelard therefore has a more realistic understanding of the role of the human subject in the process. Rather than ascribing to the latter the power to intuit timeless essences or to see the human imagination as the centre of all meaning, imagination must be conscious of something other than itself which motivates, induces and transforms it. This other is exactly the world of possibility, at once invented and discovered by imagination and the source of *both* scientific and poetic creation. 'What the imaginative sources of science and poetry share in common is the creative ability to break with the everyday 'facts' of *Homo faber* and transmute each of us into a *Homo aleator* - someone able to explore those imaginary possible which emerge into existence at the intersection between self and the world. Scientific and poetic creation both derive from a deeper *poiesis* wherein imagination and reality make and remake each other' (89).

The linguistic turn

The return to the world, the remaking of reality as part of a process of interaction between imagination and reality, were all taken up by Ricoeur in some form or another in his journey from symbol to world. But most influential was his disclosure of the poetical role of *language* and his insistence on a *logos* of poetical interaction between the imaginative consciousness and the images themselves (cf also Brann 1991:150). Exploring imagination as a dimension of *language* and moving from vision to meaning, would be the focal point of Ricoeur's contribution.

In most phenomenological investigations of imagination, *vision*, that is, the way we *see* the world or the essence of things (*Schau*) occupies a central position. An important shift occurred when imagination was interpreted not only in terms seeing and description, but also in terms of understanding and of speaking (discourse). The shift from *vision* to *language* was prepared in various ways. We have already referred to Bachelard's views on a poetic or linguistic imagination. But it was Heidegger, more than anybody else, who, with his critical analysis of Kant's concept of 'transcendental imagination,' opened the way for a hermeneutical re-assessment of imagination. Heidegger enlarged the scope of imagination drastically by including ontological considerations of action, time and

language and making imagination a temporal dimension of human existence. In doing so, he unsettled many accepted positions, but also facilitated a better understanding of the dynamic nature of imagination. Linking on to Kant's concept of a 'pure productive imagination', he claims that imagination *precedes* all experience. As a faculty of intuition, imagination is formative in the sense that it produces a particular image. But - and that is the important point - it is at one and the same time receptive *and* productive. Heidegger associates the receptive with what is sensible, the productive with what is spontaneous. In this way it becomes possible to combine thought and experience and therefore he claims that imagination can ultimately be understood as the source of all human knowledge. The dialectic tension created by the simultaneous presence of both the receptive and productive aspects of imagination 'at one and the same time' would be important for further developments.

Paul Ricoeur's journey through philosophy, linguistics and theology *en route* to a hermeneutics of imagining makes for fascinating reading. For our present purposes, it suffices to say that although the concept of imagination was not so prominent in his early work, since *Le symbolique du mal* (1960), *La métaphore vive* (1975), *Temps et récit* (1983-5), *Ideology and utopia* (1986) and *Du texte à l'action* (1986) the development of a hermeneutics of imagining became the overriding concern of his work.

The starting point for his own efforts was what he experienced as an inadequacy in the work of his phenomenological predecessors. In order to activate the poetic potential of imagination, the need for a double presence must be affirmed, that is, the ability to say one thing in terms of another or to say several things at the same time. It is by this simultaneous juxtaposing of two different worlds that new meaning is produced. Phenomenology too often conceived of the imaginary world as a negation of the perceptual world. Ricoeur therefore distinguishes between two rival theories of imagination - theories of the *reproductive* imagination, explaining the process in terms of the object and theories of the *productive* imagination, explaining our imaginative activity in terms of the subject. If the image is mistaken for the real, this leads to confusion and ends in the lack of critical consciousness. If the image is only understood as the absence of the real, the innovative tension is lost. Both aspects must be held together. To achieve this, the illusion of a direct relation between image and reality must give up for a more indirect approach and for the acceptance of hermeneutics as the art of deciphering indirect meanings. This will also enable us to overcome the traditional antagonism between will and necessity. 'We have thought too much in terms of a will that submits and not enough in terms of an imagination which opens up' (Ricoeur, quoted by Kearney 1991:139).

The symbolic imagination

The choice for a verbal rather than a visual approach to imagination by Ricoeur is therefore not without reason. It has distinct advantages: Images are no longer seen as the (inadequate) residues of absent realities. Secondly, it shifts the focus from the reproductive (tied to the object) to the productive (tied to the subject) aspect of

imagination and thirdly, it brings imagination under the discipline of the linguistic process

The focus thereby shifts from the content to the function of images as part of a linguistic process. The phenomenological account of imagination as appearance therefore needs to be supplemented by its hermeneutical account as meaning. For Ricoeur, 'a poetic imagination is one which creates meaning by responding to the desire of being to be expressed. It is a Janus facing in two directions at once - back to the being that is revealed and forward to the language that is revealing. And at the level of language itself it also does double duty, for it produces a text which opens up new horizons of meaning to the reader. The poetic imagination liberates the reader into a free space of possibility, suspending the reference to the immediate world of perception (both the author's and the reader's) and thereby disclosing 'new ways of being in the world'. The function of 'semantic innovation' - which is most proper to imagination - is therefore, in its most fundamental sense, an *ontological* event. The innovative power of linguistic imagination is not some 'decorative excess or effusion of subjectivity, but the capacity of language to open up new worlds'. The function of imagination in poetry or myth, for example, is defined as the 'disclosure of unprecedented worlds, an opening unto possible worlds which transcend the limits of our actual world'. (141)

Ontological novelty through interpretation becomes possible if one looks beyond the first-order reference of empirical reality to a second-order reference of possible worlds. In contrast to a structuralist or existentialist approach, a hermeneutic of imagination focuses on the capacity of world-disclosure yielded by texts. 'In short, hermeneutics is not confined to the *objective* structural analysis of texts, nor to the *subjective* existential analysis of the authors of texts; its primary concern is with the *worlds* which these authors and texts open up' (141). But merely discovering these worlds through interpretation is not enough - it also provides us with a way *back* to reality of which texts are just a hermeneutical and discursive *detour* and provides the basis for projects of action. Possible worlds of imagination can be made real by action. Any escapist use of imagination is thereby nipped in the bud. This logical consequence of Ricoeur's hermeneutic has specific implications for social responsibility, as we shall see below.

Chronologically speaking, Ricoeur's concept of a poetic imagination follows on preceding investigations of the symbolic imagination and the oneiric imagination. In these studies, the ground was prepared for his later views and for their logical conclusion in the form of a social imagination. His *Le symbolique du mal* signals a departure from descriptive phenomenology as a mere reflection on intentional modes of consciousness to a hermeneutical interest in the mediating function of signs and symbols. Myths should be understood not primarily as attempts at explaining, but appreciated for their *exploratory* function - exploring new possibilities and new worlds. Symbols do not merely or really represent - they point, suggest, direct. The dynamic image of expression should have precedence over the static image of a portrait. The symbol therefore attests to the inventive powers of language and reveals its fundamental *linguistic* nature. The hermeneutic act therefore requires a sympathetic re-imagining of the cosmic images of our foundational myths. But - the symbol presupposes language. The original

phenomenological ideal of a philosophy without presuppositions cannot be fulfilled. Before reflection and intuition there are already symbols, that is, language. The hermeneutical task is to recover this language in its symbolic fullness. This is not a nostalgic longing for a pristine *Ursprache*, but a singular modern task of freeing language from its formalistic restraints and rediscovering language's inventive powers of symbolisation. 'In short, we need to combine the critical gesture of modernity with the symbolising gesture of myth if we are to develop an adequate hermeneutic of human imagination' (146).

The oneiric imagination

Symbols operate not only on the level of the conscious, but also on the level of the unconscious. Ricoeur therefore also explored what can be called the oneiric imagination. The dream image shows how we can say things other than what we are ostensibly saying and how behind direct meanings there are indirect ones. This comes close to the modern concept of the 'hidden transcript'. Again we are dealing with a linguistic phenomenon. The poet also is not far from the dreamer. For Ricoeur the important point is that symbols are essentially 'image-words' which traverse 'image representations'. 'Imagination is not simply the power to make absent objects present, The visual images of dreams are sensory vehicles for verbal images which transcend them and designate *other* meanings than the literal ones' (147).

Whereas poetry reveals the positive pole of dreams, there is also be a negative side. Images, as we encounter them in dreams, can also serve to mask meanings. Psychoanalysis is therefore correct in promoting a hermeneutic of suspicion to help them in their archaeological task of unveiling experiences preceding the dream. But at the same time, a hermeneutic of affirmation is needed, because dream images are also ways of *saying* or articulating an underlying desire. All cannot be explained in terms of what precedes (Bachelard: 'You cannot explain the flower by the fertilizer') - also what the image reaches for, must be understood. A proper hermeneutic therefore need both recollection and projection - again the dual function of reaching back and forward. Ricoeur stresses this dual function of the hermeneutical imagination: 'In order to illustrate this double dependency, reflection must humble consciousness and interpret it through symbolic significations, rising up from *behind* or in *front* of consciousness, *beneath* and *beyond* it. In short, reflection must include an archaeology and an eschatology' (148).

A hermeneutic of suspicion is indispensable in order to demystify the dissimulating property of phantasms in order to release the symbolising power of images. Rational interpretation can never exhaust images - there always remains a surplus, which points of an inexhaustible creativity of meaning. He insists that news meaning *can* emerge and that things as they are *can* change. Due to this excess of imagination over reason images call forth a multiplicity of meanings and this is why a hermeneutic of imagination culminates not in absolute knowledge but in an endless conflict of interpretation.

The poetical imagination

Chronologically speaking, Ricoeur's work on the symbolic and the oneiric imagination preceded his investigation of the poetic imagination. At the same time, this earlier work anticipated much of what was to follow and prepared the ground for his studies of metaphor and narrative. The connecting theme which lends coherence to his wide-ranging forays into the production of meaning, is the fundamental *linguistic* nature of existence and understanding. In the case of the symbolic and the oneiric, the discursive nature of imagination had to be demonstrated. In the case of the poetic imagination, language is coming into its own. As he himself explains, the aim with his *La métaphore vive* was to show how language could extend itself to its very limits forever discovering new resonances within itself. He also wanted to make clear that there is not just an epistemological and political imagination, but also, and 'perhaps more fundamentally, a *linguistic imagination* which generates and regenerates meaning through the living powers of metaphoricality'. In the case of *Time and narrative*, the analysis of the narrative operations in a literary text reveals how we formulate a new structure of time by creating new modes of plot and characterisation and 'how narrativity, as the construction or deconstruction of paradigms of story-telling, is a perpetual search for new ways of expressing human time, a production or creation 'of meaning' (150).

In order to demonstrate the salient features of Ricoeur's poetical imagination, I shall concentrate in what follows on his views of metaphor. His analysis of narrativity reveals similar aspects, but will require an investigation of its own. In the case of metaphor, the function of *reference* is crucial for Ricoeur's understanding of the dynamics of poetical imagination and this will be the focus of the following survey.

The dynamic nature of reference

The main focus of Ricoeur's seminal study *The Rule of Metaphor* is certainly not reference, but rather the creation of meaning in language. Nonetheless, reference is a recurring theme in these multi-disciplinary studies and the seventh study is devoted specifically to the relationship between metaphor and reference. We will therefore not follow the main line of Ricoeur's argument, but draw from his work three aspects which are important for our present topic: reference as self-transcendence, reference as redescription and reference as an integrative process.

Reference as self-transcendence

'We are not satisfied with a sense, we presuppose a reference'. This insight of Gottlob Frege which Ricoeur.³ (19) adapts for his own purposes, touches on one of the most fundamental characteristics of reference, namely its self-transcending nature. Reference represents an inexorable drive towards the signified which cannot be stopped prematurely and which in fact makes the whole process of

3 References to P Ricoeur 1977. *The rule of metaphor*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

communication possible. This implies that reference can only be conceived of as a *process*. It is this characteristic which lends to the metaphor its power and which inevitably leads Ricoeur to find the locus of the metaphor not in the *word*, but in the statement or *sentence*. If, in a preliminary definition, metaphor is described as giving an unaccustomed name to something, this transposition already presupposes a movement *in nuce*. 'But the investigation of the interrelationships of meaning that give rise to this transposition of the name also relentlessly forces open the frame of reference determined by the word, and *a fortiori* that determined by the name or noun, and imposes the *statement* as the sole contextual milieu within which the transposition of meaning takes place' (65). If we are to progress beyond identifying and naming metaphors to 'showing how it is brought about', we must move from sign to sentence.

The option for the *sentence* as the unit of discourse instead of the *word* (following a suggestion by Benveniste), represents a key element in Ricoeur's thinking. It is indicative of a move from a static (naming, identifying, substituting) to a dynamic (word-in-use, production) understanding of metaphor. At the same time, it reveals much about his view of language as a whole. Metaphor is to be understood as the 'constitutive form of language' (80), which means that the movement of discourse and the dynamic behind reference is set in motion by a dialectical tension between a whole series of oppositions, of which the contrast between semantics and semiotics is one of the most important.

The option for semantics in favour of semiotics is Ricoeur's way of providing a methodological basis to explain the dynamic nature of reference. Again following Benveniste, he insists that these two concepts represent two different kinds of linguistics (68). Although the sentence is formed by words, it constitutes a whole which is not reducible to the sum of its parts and - what is important for the issue of reference - the meaning inherent in this whole is distributed over the totality of the constituents as an ensemble. 'Rather than there being a linear progression from one unit to the other, then, new properties appear, which derive from this specific relationship between units of different levels' (67). Where semiotics, according to this view, deals with the relationship between signs of words as separate entities, semantics deals with words-in-combination, or rather, words-in-interaction.

From this perspective, a series of dialectical pairs come into play. The first is that discourse always occurs as an event, but is to be understood as meaning (70). By this is meant that the linguistic system, because it is synchronic, has only virtual existence and has to be realised or actualised in a specific act of language use. But this language event, precisely because of its individual and localised nature, is fleeting and transitory. What actually lends durability and continuity to the process, is that the event can be identified and reidentified as 'the same'. This is what meaning entails. It is dependent on the repeatability of the event and on the possibility to identify it as 'the same'.

Recognising the 'event character' of discourse, as well as the formation and transfer of meaning, makes it possible to differentiate further, like Grice's distinction between 'utterance meaning', 'meaning of the utterance' and 'utterer's meaning'. It also makes it possible to set off the instance of discourse from its intention. These distinctions have specific relevance for the different forms of

reference, making clear that reference on the semiotic level is of a different nature compared to reference of the semantic level. It is for this reason that Ricoeur maintains that semiotics and semantics belong to two different orders.

The second pair concerns the distinction between the identifying and the predicative function of discourse. This contrast is responsible for the fundamental polarity of language. The identifying function is in essence a process of reduction, aimed at singling out the logical subject of the discourse, naming a specific individual or thing. The predicative function is a process of expansion and qualification, weaving a network of relations. It is this dissymmetry between two functions which makes language work (71). What is further of great importance, is that the identifying (and singularizing) function is always linked to what exists, while the predicative function concerns the non-existent. For the introduction of what is new, for alternatives, for a different perspective on reality, the predicative function becomes critical, as we shall see. (For those versed in discourse analysis based on the *kōlon* as unit, it is interesting that Ricoeur follows Benveniste in the view that the predicate is sufficient in itself to be the criterion of units of discourse. This is exactly the grammatical basis of the *kōlon*).

Thirdly, the structure of the acts of discourse also reveals different functions. When using language, one is doing different things on different levels. In terms of the well-known distinction of Austin between the locutionary and perlocutionary force of a speech act, and consequently between constatives and performatives, one can state, order, promise or request. The modality of the sentence is directly linked to its force. Acknowledging the pragmatic dimension of language also means that the scope of reference becomes wider. More than logical propositions belongs to language - 'psychological' elements like belief, desire, feelings can be anchored in language.

The fourth pair is Frege's concepts of *sense* (*Sinn*) and *reference* (*Bedeutung*), making it possible to separate what is said from that of which one speaks and illustrating that the same referent can have two senses (evening/morning star). On the level of the word or language *in abstracto* there is no real reference problem, as signs refer internally to other signs in the system. However, on the level of the sentence and of discourse (language-in-use), the situation changes and language can no longer be contained within itself. 'In the phenomenon of the sentence, language passes outside itself; reference is the mark of the self-transcendence of language' (74). Nothing illustrates the difference between semiotics and semantics clearer than this distinction. But it also brings the relationship between language and the world into play and discloses the mediating function of language. Two aspects are important for what will follow later. Firstly, in some way language mediates between humans and world, integrating them with society. Secondly, external reference does not eliminate or abolish internal reference within the system - both forms are interdependent.

External reference can be linked to the notion of the intended, because this is what reaches beyond language. Ricoeur therefore supports Husserl's phenomenological analysis based on intentionality. 'Language is intentional par excellence; it aims beyond itself' (74).

Fifthly, a distinction should be made between reference to reality and to the speaker. To the extent that discourse refers to something outside itself, it also refers to the author/speaker. But this can only happen on the level of discourse. Personal pronouns are 'neutral' or 'non-referential' by themselves. It is only as part of discourse that it becomes possible to identify the 'I' or 'you' or 'he' or 'she'. Letter-writing - and the letters of the New Testament are a good case in point - illustrates this even better, marking the discourse both spatially and temporally. What Ricoeur only touches on, became a central theme in reception theory with its focus on the implied author and reader.

Finally, Ricoeur deals with the redistribution of the spheres of the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic. Paradigmatic alternatives clearly belong to the semiotic order, while the syntagmatic net of relations provides the basis for the sentence, putting into effect the connecting power of discourse. Identification and substitution are functions which operate in the context of semiotics, while the metaphorical process forms part and parcel of the broader semantic process.

The dynamic nature of discourse and the inexorable drive to move beyond itself lends strength and creativity to reference. How this energy is harnessed to effect changes in perception and action, brings us to the crucial aspect of reference.

Reference as redescription

The power of discourse is not undirected, nor is reference aimless. Discourse in its pragmatic form is aimed at persuasion and change. The rhetorical intent of discourse and the issue of reference are therefore intimately connected. In this section, we shall concentrate on the role of reference in enabling shifts - shifts in language, effecting shifts in meaning, aimed at shifts in understanding, perception and action. 'Ordinary conversation consists in following these shifts, and rhetoric should teach their mastery' (79). The focus for Ricoeur is of course on metaphor, but the implications for discourse remain the same. According to his view, the metaphor holds together within one simple meaning two different missing parts of different contexts of a composite meaning. 'Thus, we are not dealing any longer with a simple transfer of words, but with a commerce between thoughts, that is, a transaction between contexts. If metaphor is a competence, a talent, then it is a talent of thinking. Rhetoric is just the reflection and the translation of this talent into a distinct body of knowledge' (80).

How is this *transaction between contexts* achieved? The first requirement is to bring two diverse, unusual, novel elements together in the context of a single metaphor or of a specific text. These contrasting elements have been called the *tenor* and the *vehicle* of the metaphor (Harris) or its *focus* and *frame* (Black). The combination must strike a note, establish an obvious connection, but also a difference between the two elements. Once these conditions have been met, the process of interaction can be set in motion. For this, a delicate balance must be maintained between the known and the unknown, between the old and the new. If the difference is too big, a shift cannot take place and the metaphor will not work. If it is too small, it will like-wise not succeed, because not enough new information is offered. On the one hand, the two elements must be close enough

to ensure a spark of recognition or resemblance. On the other, there must be sufficient difference and distance to arouse curiosity and to achieve a shift. A theory of metaphor that is based merely on the idea of substitution or ornamentation is therefore bound to fail, because the metaphorical event entails much more than simply exchanging one element for another - a new entity is created in the process.

What is true of the metaphor, becomes even clearer on the level of discourse. In a more extended text, the scope for redescription is that much bigger. An alternative understanding of reality can be offered, an alternative position can be described in much more detail. In narrative texts, redescription can take the form of an alternative point of view or the offering of different roles with which the reader can identify. In argumentative texts, alternative positions or perspectives are developed with the help of logical and/or rhetorical devices. The insights offered by metaphors and alternative roles delineated in narratives, can add up to a more comprehensive understanding of reality and in this way representing a 'proposed world' - a world the reader may adopt or inhabit. We are therefore not satisfied with the structure of the work, we presuppose a world of the work (220). In this way the structure of the work becomes the sense, the world of the work its reference. 'Hermeneutics then is simply the theory that regulates the transition from structure of the work to world of the work' (220). Should such a transition take place, the shifting process has reached its (preliminary) goal.

Can more be said about how exactly the shift takes place? We have already referred to the fact that the process of reference implies an interaction or exchange between two contexts. This exchange only becomes possible when reference in the descriptive, literal sense is *suspended* in favour of what can be called 'poetic' reference. 'The literary work through the structure proper to it displays a world only under the condition that the reference of descriptive discourse is suspended. Or to put it another way, discourse in the literary work sets out its denotation as a second-level denotation, by means of the suspension of the first-level denotation of discourse' (221).

The shift is therefore achieved by the interaction between suspended reference and displayed reference. 'Just as the metaphorical statement captures its sense as metaphorical midst the ruins of the literal sense, so it achieves its reference upon the ruins of what might be called (in symmetrical fashion) its literal reference' (221). The reference of the work and its proposed world can only be set free if its first-order reference is suspended.

The difference between suspended and displayed reference alerts us to an important aspect, namely the ambiguity that is always part of reference. Phonic equivalence leads to the assumption of semantic equivalence, which equivalence is then shattered. Semantic ambiguity is continued by other forms of ambiguity that affects all functions of communication and which appears in the form of split addressers, split addressees and split reference. This ambiguity is best expressed in the exordium of fairy tales, like that of the Majorca storytellers: 'It was and it was

not', which for Ricoeur expresses *in nuce* all that can be said about metaphorical truth.

To move from the single metaphor to the world of the text may seem quite a distance. But the same dynamic is at work and Ricoeur therefore prefers to talk of the metaphorical *process*. Metaphors do not function in isolation and become most effective if their referential function is carried by a metaphoric network rather than by an isolated metaphorical statement. How such a network is developed to offer eventually a comprehensive alternative view of the whole of reality and existence, is very well illustrated in the Pauline letters. Paul is fond of using theological 'formulas' (in Christ, under the law, through faith). These formulas are nodes of a whole network of theological ideas which form the building blocks of his theology.⁴

In the redescriptive function of reference, both elements of the term are important. The 're' presupposes a certain measure of familiarity, of known territory from which to push off into the unknown. What is described, is an alternative view of reality - consistent in itself, but different from what precedes. How different, is often lost in the subsequent process of re-familiarisation. The domestication of metaphors robs them of their power. The same happens in the ongoing interpretation of biblical texts. The radical nature of Jesus' teaching, which proposes a complete reversal of the status quo and of existing values ('You have heard that it is said ... but I tell you') is often obscured by subsequent interpretations. However, redescription means that something completely new can be introduced. Here the creative and innovative potential of language, and especially of fiction, comes into its own. We have seen with what inventiveness contemporary authors use historical material and literary imagination in order to present an alternative perspective on the same material to the reader. Reading requires the same kind of imagination and inventiveness in order to be successful.

Reference as an integrative process

A final aspect of importance is the interaction between the different forms of reference. Ricoeur constantly stresses that the sentence as unit of discourse is not a mosaic, but an organism. The metaphor works because all elements interact - the plus it produces is not a summation of the parts, but a new entity. This also enables us to respect the different forms of reference. Talk of the suspension of first-order reference may create the mistaken impression that it is abolished. We have already seen that metaphor can best be described as an event which takes place where several semantic fields intersect. Recognising the impossibility of a literal interpretation of a metaphor does not lead to its abolishment by a metaphorical interpretation, but submits to it while resisting.

The implication of the above is that we need not choose between the different forms of reference. *All* aspects of reference function together to create meaning. Reference in front of the text is not the abolishment of other forms of reference, but is in fact built on these forms and dependent on them for success. To know

4 Cf BC Lategan 1991. Formulas in the language of Paul, *Neotestamentica* 25, 75-87.

what a Pharisee is (reference *behind* the text), to understand to what it refers as part of the discourse of Matthew 23 (reference *in* the text) is essential for discovering the meaning *in front* of the text. The statement by Vorster in *Text and Reality* (1986:61) points in the same direction, namely that narratives are not merely windows nor mirrors - they are *both*. We do not have to chose, but we need to differentiate in order to allow the free and full flow of the text.

The social imagination and the return to reality

We have stressed that Ricoeur's detour via symbol, dream, metaphor and narrative had as ultimate goal the return to reality. As final stage of poetic imagination, the hermeneutical circle via the reception of the reader, returns to the world of action. The claim that our telling of stories and our discovering of alternative words exercise a formative influence on our modes of action and behaviour in society, is a momentous one. In his lectures on *Lectures on ideology and utopia* (1986), Ricoeur shows that the reference in front of the text is not automatically liberating. Both ideology and utopia constitute sets of collective images which motivates a society towards a certain mode of thinking and acting. Ideology has the function of preservation and conservation, legitimising the status quo. Utopia tends towards rupture, fundamentally questioning the status quo. But if the horizon of expectation opened up by utopia is not brought into contact with our field of experience, it becomes pathologically devoid of meaning. 'The universal loses contact with the actual. Expectancy becomes dissociated from existence' (Kearney 1991:160). A *mediating* facility is lacking. Utopias as such is not the problem - what is sorely needed, are *paths* to utopia. We required more than ever a social imagination capable of mediating between these two sundered realms of past and future. The tension between tradition and utopia must be preserved, but in such a way that the momentum towards the possible is retained.

The post-modern attempt to rewrite history, is not only an attempt to redeem the past, but also to provide a new beginning for the present reader. In biblical texts, the persuasive intention is even more prominent and the alternative offered in the form of poetic, narrative and argumentative discourse, so extensive that it offers a comprehensive new understanding of the self and of reality. In biblical terms, this discourse is aimed at conversion, re-birth and resurrection. A better understanding of the function of reference in all its forms holds the key to unlock the transformative potential of these texts in contemporary situations.

Textual application: Re-imagining Abraham and interpreting the parable of the labourers hired at different times

In this final section, two brief indications are given of the role of imagination in the actual interpretation of texts. The first concerns the re-imagining of Abraham as the father of *all* believers in Galatians 3. The image of Abraham as archetype of the faithful, as the respondent to God's call and as the beneficiary of God's promises, is probably one of the most stable in Jewish tradition. With the institution of the covenant and the designation of the circumcision as sign of the covenant (Gen 17), faith/covenant/circumcision/promise/offspring became

associative correlates which for all practical purposes determined the image of Abraham, institutionalised in the formula 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ...' So strong was the force of this correlation that it also drew into its orbit the (chronological later) Sinai event and the giving of the Torah. The Torah, and the accompanying rite of circumcision thus became further co-determinants of the image of Abraham. The post-Sinai image of Abraham per definition included both these features. It was therefore only natural that Paul's opponents insisted that the new converts from the gentiles should adopt the Jewish way of life, including being circumcised and adhering to the precepts of the law ('doing the works of the law'), if they really would like to be received into the community of faith.

The effectiveness of this argument can be deduced from the precarious position in which Paul finds himself. The authority of the erstwhile founder of the congregation is seriously challenged. His opponents offer not only inclusion in the broader stream of Jewish tradition, but also the added security of doing God's will as expressed by the Torah.

Against this position Paul is practically defenseless. By invoking the traditional image of Abraham as the example to emulate, his opponents have won the Galatians over and effectively sealed Paul's lot. But it is exactly this strong point of his opponents which offers the opportunity to the apostle to turn the tables by re-imagining Abraham. When the latter's position is examined carefully, it becomes clear that Abraham became the archetype of all believers *before* he was circumcised and *before* the law appeared on the scene (Gal 3:17). It was his act of faith in responding to God's call which formed the basis for his righteousness (Gal 3:6). *This* was what qualified him to be the father of all believers and therefore all who *believe* - including the gentiles - become children of Abraham. Neither circumcision nor law is the qualifying precondition, but faith alone. In this way the believing gentiles are no longer outsiders or second class citizens - through Christ they are the descendants of Abraham and indeed heirs to the promises God made to Abraham (Gal 3:29). The key to this re-interpretation which enables Paul to vindicate the position of the gentiles as believers, is the challenging of the post-Sinai image of Abraham by invoking his pre-Sinai image.

A similar reversal takes place in the parable of the labourers hired at different times (Matt 20:1-16) - not by revisiting the tradition this time, but by re-imagining existing economic practices. In terms of normal business and farming practice, it does not make economic sense to pay all labourers the same wage, irrespective of the hours they have worked on a specific day. But that is exactly what is celebrated in this parable, which ends with the enigmatic saying: 'The last will be first and the first last' (20:16). All attempts to justify the point made in the parable by appealing to the customs of the day or to God's free will, are bound to be unconvincing. A re-imagination of a different kind is needed in this case. The point is not sound business practice or economic justice, but the nature of God's grace. His grace is not calculated in terms of what people deserve. Nor is it given in percentages or in parts. When God gives his grace, it is undeserved and it is total - *all* of his grace to all, irrespective of merit. A more intense use of imagination is called for to induce the parable to give up its secret.

Postscript: Post-modernist critique of imagination

As indicated in the introduction, the concept of imagination is also under attack from post-modernism. The de-centering of the human subject is bound to have an effect on human imagination. Kearney (1991:172) mentions four main refusals in post-modernist theory: The refusal of an imagining subject as transcendental origin of meaning, the refusal of grand universalising narratives of history, the refusal of the modern project of truth and the refusal of the hallowed modernist distinction between high art and mass culture. The idea of an original imagination is revealed to be no more than the effect of the endless intertextuality of language. Thus the conventional relation between image and origin is exchanged for a post-modern model of similitude, where the image refers only to other images.

The modern notion of a autonomous ego can indeed give rise to a false consciousness and the critique of post-modernism has helped to bring this back to more realistic proportions. But imagination need not be thought of in such an individualistic way. The real challenge is to relate texts of imagination - whether they are of individual origin or not, to the human and historical contexts in which they operate. Beyond the extremes of sovereign subjectivity and anonymous linguistic systems, a different form of mediating between imagination and reality is to be found. Neither the subject nor the system offers a key to the solution. The task remains to interpret the images of the other and to transfigure one's own image of the world in response to this interpretation. The irreducible otherness of meaning should be respected and imagination, even in a post-modern context, should not lead us away from reality, but bring us back to reality from a different perspective. In a time of social transition, this calls for a constructive contribution of imagination. It is not enough to imagine freedom from oppression. What is also needed, is to imagine how this freedom can be sustained and developed to become a constructive force and a source of constant renewal.

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