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The Specificity of Reference (YDS 12-189)

This is taken from a transcript of a manuscript (which seems no longer to exist) of a paper probably delivered at an American Academy of Religion seminar responding to a paper by William Beardslee. The transcript was apparently made by someone unfamiliar with Frei's handwriting or his subject-matter ('Fredric Jameson's The Prison-House of Language*', for instance, has been rendered 'Fadic Lamison's* The Prison Tense of Language*'), and I have had to make some guesses as to what Frei's text might originally have said. I've noted those places where my alterations affect the sense. CPH U6 ('Beardslee and Hermeneutics').*

Reference and Reality

There is a tenacious sense that all of us have, even those of us who most apologetically have to confess barely knowing the difference between causal efficacy and presentational immediacy, that our descriptive concepts *refer* – that all statements are propositions, and propositions are cast in the shape of assertions under the form of judgments. In other words, even for those of us who are not philosophers or philosophical theologians and therefore blunder foolishly into process hermeneutic groups because a wiser man than ourselves has kindly made a passing reference to a book we may have written once in a foolishly reckless moment – I say even for *those* there is a tenacious sense that the ladder from logic through *experience* to the most refined speculation is one in which self and reality, mind and nature belong together; that the dualists, both metaphysical and epistemological are wrong. We may, for example, say that the mind is the mirror of nature after all, against those who with Richard Rorty[1] claim that the only reason the Seventeenth Century did not 'misunderstand' the mirror of nature[2] was that they *couldn't* misunderstand it, since after all they had *invented* it.[3] What an irony Rorty's claim would be – if I may simply entertain it as a hypothesis for a moment – for the cutting edge of his suggestion is that anyone who moves in to heal dualist splits is bound to play the game on his opponents' grounds, since they *invented* the game or the problem, and the revisers, try as they might, can't do more than change some of the rules (i.e. the conceptual descriptions) by which it is played; it's still the same game.

But that is indeed no more than a tempting hypothesis for the moment, a momentary if elemental, sudden and therefore frightening state of affairs, and we return to our tenacious native sense that mind and reality belong together. And certainly we look with something like pity – no, that's wrong, with reverse sympathy – on those who seem to have the very opposite elemental reaction.

They say that the best way to get out of the problem or the dualistic game is not to become solipsistic Idealists but to pursue an option such as speaking of the social character of language – in a sociological rather than parapsychic sense of the term social – and to say that language as a social construct is the very condition of experience, rather than vice versa; that communal languages have their own irreducible integrity even as they are porous[4] and open in time and therefore have their own natural history. There are of course those who experience this kind of persuasion, including the consequence that reality is a social construct, as a relief, a therapeutic release from what they regard as hypostatized and therefore insolubly generalized problems like 'reference' (as though that were a single univocal term) or truth (as though that term had a single universal status which is given conceptual content by referring it to another universal which is termed 'meaning'). Against this kind of globalizing, the irreducibly social, particular form of language comes to some people as a relief. But others regard that possibility with a fear well expressed in the title of Fredric Jameson's book, *The Prison-House of Language*.[5]

May I confess to being torn hopelessly both ways? The muting of 'reference' as a single universal in favor of[6] concepts referring in various ways – or rather, people referring by means of concepts in various ways, comes as a relief, since referring to God, to my Dachshund, to the way I love my children, to the self that loves them, to the nuclear structure of genes, and to the biography of Leopold Bloom which has just been written despite or because of the fact that hitherto he had never existed apart from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, may not be the same thing in all these cases.[7] But on the other hand, the prison-house of language image comes up, and relief and fear live side by side when I deny that elemental sense that I am an embodied mind, subject or superject, in a real world of which I actually am a social and temporal location or series of locations. But relief or fear aside, sometimes the native affirmation of the sense of being able to know the true character of reality is to the fore, sometimes the sense that all speculative thinking to demonstrate the referential character of words and concepts is futile.

It is obvious, then, that I am neither determinedly antagonistic to nor wholly ardently committed to the problematic that preoccupies Professor Beardslee. If I do have to use large-scale technical language I want simply to affirm my belief that 'hermeneutics' has to do with 'meaning', i.e. with criteria and rules for sound interpretation of texts, rather than with 'truth', and I want to stress that even the limited use of 'truth' to mean 'true interpretation of a text' rather than 'relation of the text to true reality' is only secondary for me, though I won't deny that I puzzle about it. Hermeneutics has to have *breathing space*: don't move in on it too quickly with (trans-)hermeneutical concerns, e.g. the character of symbolization; Christian theological hermeneutics is a second-order discipline on a practice, a practice that is communal, and the

relation between signifier and signified in that practice is a semantic matter, so that premature reference to, e.g., how symbols may be reality-laden through mutual participation of symbol and reality only tends to get us back into that representationalism all of us want to avoid.

Narrative Sense

I am deeply concerned about the specificity of narrative texts, but there are all sorts of texts, and the Bible includes all kinds of texts to which different hermeneutical rules may apply. For example, I may want to read a letter in a different way from the way I read a story – non-narratively, that is – even if the same person crops up in the tale and in the correspondence, viz. Jesus Christ. In other words, I hope nobody thinks of something called 'narrative sense' as kind of hermeneutical absolute. On the other hand, it does impose some constraints:[8] consider Bultmann, to whom Beardslee refers, and who takes personhood as a kind of root concept, and then identifies a specific person – Jesus of Nazareth – as irreducibly himself. Now the way we identify specific human agents in their specificity (we can do other things with them too, we can use them as illustrations of microcosmic organic wholes or as non-narrative repeatable textual structures or as deconstructionist misprisions of the interpreter) is by telling their specific self-enactment in their specific context, whether historical or fictional, so that the issue of reference is *hermeneutically*, though probably not *theologically* irrelevant – so, I think that the hermeneutical rule for irreducible identification of a person in a narrative text is: you follow the diachronic, not the synchronic line, you *narrate* him or her because he/she is not a separable subject/substance from his/her depiction in or as his/her story. Yet what Bultmann wants to do is both to *identify* the specific person – if you will, Jesus' scandal of particularity – *and* to dismantle the narrative – which, as Professor Beardslee rightly remarks, is simply not to play by the rules that govern this game; he has a lousy, indeed an impossible hermeneutics. More than that I don't want to say. I am not saying narrative is all, or even that narrative texts can't be dealt with by other rules of exegesis.

(And, by the way, whether or not the narrative depiction claims that the 'transcendent is encountered beyond the ethical rather than the aesthetic' is a moot question for me. Hermeneutically, once again, I'd rather leave that aside; I don't know what 'the transcendent' is doing in the first place messing around in my modest second-order rules exhibited in the first-order use of language, and nothing but language. But *if* I have to deal with that kind of sweeping generalization, I suppose I'd say that some people long before Frank Kermode – to whom all honor – have thought of narratives as more nearly aesthetic language-play and others (F.R. Leavis the most scary example) as moral enterprises. I focused on a limited type of narrative in a limited hermeneutical

context; realistic narrative as the mode of personal identification: Who is this person in and from his story? Identity-depiction of that sort is ethical yet also aesthetic, you could even call it the ontologization of the irreducibly particularist warning against well-intentioned endeavors to restore to ethical character.)

The Irreducible Variety of Hermeneutics

I am neutral about how to integrate this approach with that of narrative as an aesthetic linguistic world in which strong readers find irradiating moments in discontinuous quanta. I am not sanguine about finding a global hermeneutics to cover these and other narratives – as well as non-narrative texts – since I believe the variety of phenomenological hermeneutics may be far worse than either structuralist or deconstructionist procedure allows. Nor, however, do I regard this as a matter for distress as I gather Professor Beardslee does. Hermeneutics in general, yes, not sacred or tailored to the uniqueness of the Bible; but there is no one general hermeneutics. The only way to get one is to have a general philosophical theory or system foundational for the general hermeneutics, so that all seemingly divergent elements of general hermeneutical approaches may be harmonized by having their specific places in the total scheme assigned to them. But that foundational endeavor I mistrust deeply – I want my hermeneutics to allow me to mean with my texts in *independence* from the reality-bearing of the texts and the hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics, though general, is, I believe, context–specific. And that goes for the tools as well as the textual stuff on which they work. Do I want to leave it at that? Didn't I confess a yearning for interconnection and, more, a common transcendent reference that could function as a common norm or truth for what is right in interpretation? Half of me agrees with Professor Beardslee's dream and I doubt that it comes closer to realization than in today's western world.

In the meantime I find that Professor Beardslee encourages me most kindly, as does Paul Ricoeur among the phenomenologists,[9] to persist in 'rediscovering the reality of the "narrative sense" as part of "the self-construction" of an entity', one in which the function of a proposition is focal. I am grateful to both, but want to do so hermeneutically, i.e. with the option of having my narrative interpretation (on which I don't rest everything in any case), and thus my narrative hermeneutics, without appeal to foundational thinking. And so I take off my hermeneutical hat to Professors Beardslee and Ricoeur, but at the same time wave an equally friendly yet arms-distance maintaining hello to my structuralist, poststructuralist, and deconstructionist companions.

All that that means is that at the risk of looking utterly relativist to some and utterly reactionary to Professors Beardslee and Kermode, I want to do hermeneutics in the tradition of Christian theology as reflections on the use of communal language, and that as a language that has an irreducible integrity of its own, it is not systematically grounded by reference to a systematic pre-understanding or pre-linguistic experience (or expression) of reality in general.

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[1] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p.113.

[2] [The transcript has '…the mirror of nature or the iniac eye otherwise…']

[3] [The transcript has 'revealed' for 'invented' here, but 'invented' in the next sentence.]

[4] [The transcript has 'poems'.]

[5] Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language: A Critical Account of Structuralism and Russian Formalism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1975).

[6] [The transcript has 'rather than'.]

[7] [The transcript has here 'And this relief from logical and trans-logical universalism may go on to cover the very systematic preoccupation with the thinking procedure that has the conceptual name-tag, truth or reference, to say nothing of "reality".']

[8] ['It does impose some constraints' is my addition.]

[9] [The transcript has 'most kindly I my (corrective sense) as does Paul Ricoeur to the phenomenologists'.]