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## The Canon: Authority and Fascination

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### *1. Canon and authority in interpretation*

In this essay it is my intention to approach the notion of the canon from the angle of philosophical and literary hermeneutics. The reflection of hermeneutics focuses upon the attitude of a recipient towards any form of expression and communication and upon the interplay of utterance and interpreter. I will concentrate on the hermeneutics of texts and on the attitude of the reader. More specifically, I will be concerned with the hermeneutics of canonical texts. Our starting point is the actual occurrence of canons. Our analysis of canons includes not only the Old and New Testaments in Jewish and Christian tradition, but also endeavours such as that of Harold Bloom in *The Western Canon* (Bloom 1994), who makes a fascinating attempt to formulate a canon of literary works in Western culture. A canonical text is a text that is recognized as being a genuine part of a certain tradition, literary or religious. Moreover, it is a text that makes claims upon the participants of a tradition. A canonical text is a text with authority.

At this point our problem starts. The notion of authority is not a popular concept, neither in philosophy and theology, nor in literary criticism. The modern reader wants to use her or his power of reasoning, and does not want to lean upon the authority of a traditional text. I use the word 'modern' in a pregnant sense, because it is in the age of Modernity that reason has become opposed to tradition and authority. The only authority is the power of reasoning, and that power is supposed to be something which arises from within a person; it is not something which is put authoritatively upon someone.

Much could be said against this opposition of Reason and Tradition. One might, for example, bring up the position of MacIntyre and his rationality of traditions (MacIntyre 1988). For the purpose of this discussion, however, I wish to bring forward one book: Gadamer's *Truth und Method* (Gadamer 1960, esp. 281-290). Gadamer has argued that the role of prejudice is indispensable in the process of interpretation. The interpretation of canonical and traditional texts can be undertaken by reason, and there is no need to oppose Reason and Authority. Instead, Gadamer proposes a 'rehabilitation of authority and tradition'. The acknowledgment of authority is not an act of submission, but an act of recognition and, subsequently, of cognition. Real authority is not authoritarian. It is based upon the possibility of insight. It is an act of freedom and reason. In the humanities we need traditions in order to direct our pre-understanding. Gadamer brings Reason and Tradition together on a common ground.

However, the time of Gadamer and the sixties seems to be a long time ago. Our time is directed by the phrases of postmodernism and deconstruction. What deconstruction has laid bare in textual interpretation is the continuous process of differentiation that creates meaning; it has exposed the hidden plurality and counter currents of seemingly univocal, reasonable appeals. It has undermined both rationality and tradition. Deconstruction has also revealed the inevitability of such processes. We cannot escape from the differences, claims, and binds which texts impose upon us. There is no neutral, autonomous, external point of view. Recognizing the forces of

textuality, we can only take our responsibility not to hide the differences, or acquire an attitude of slight irony.

Again, Reason and Tradition are brought together, but in a totally different way than Gadamer had done before. The notion of traditional authority has been deconstructed. - Nevertheless, I observe in the deconstructivist's attitude a certain recognition of the authoritative appeal of the texts in our culture. We cannot escape from the appeal of these texts, from their force of thinking. I call this inescapability of certain texts a matter of authority, though one should perhaps call it a negative authority.

## 2. *Alternatives for deconstruction*

Is deconstruction, with its attitude of irony or its responsibility to an abstract Absolute in the text, the only possible mode of thinking?

In the field of literary criticism an alternative is proffered in Charles Altieri's *Canons and Consequences* (Altieri 1990). Altieri deliberately intends to offer an alternative to literary deconstruction, especially as a reaction to the predominance of the *différend* in Lyotard. Altieri takes a stance in a renewed liberal, humanistic tradition, when he states that canonical texts enter into a conversation with their readers, and shape their readers' agency. His point is not so much that Lyotard would be wrong with his approach, but that there is more to say about the concrete ethical impact of texts. Canonical texts are 'an institutional means of exposing people to a range of idealized attitudes' (p. 27). They are 'a stimulus to subjectivity' (p. 27) or 'a cultural grammar for interpreting experience' (p. 33). Canonical texts articulate the differences that we need for a rich, contrastive language and life; they urge us to develop a style and, in that style, a self.

The notion of grammar is taken literally by developing the differences of the three pronouns as three different interpretive stances. A text needs the first pronoun, the 'I'; that is, it needs a personal involvement of the reader. The force of metaphors and the meaning of narratives can only be understood by participation, not by observation. Moreover, the third person is needed, the more impersonal 'he', 'she', and 'they'. Though there is a certain danger of abstraction, it is in the third person that private interests are bracketed. With this aspect the third person has a direct ethical importance. In order to avoid the creation of an opposition between the personal first person pronoun and the impersonal third person pronoun, the second person 'you' arises in texts. The reader is addressed, and this creates a more personal ethical engagement than the mere third person can do. It opens what Altieri calls a 'universal intimacy'. The other of the text questions us and, in being questioned and being responsive, we develop our selves. The 'you' from the text creates a commitment that exceeds the fragmentation and differentiation.

We can add to this first alternative to deconstruction by mentioning a contribution from philosophical hermeneutics. I am thinking in particular of the hermeneutics of Ricoeur, and especially his *Oneself as Another* (Ricoeur 1992). I cannot go into his argument in detail in this place, but I have digressed upon his approach more extensively in a recent publication (Hettema 1996).<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur has much in common with Altieri in that he leans more upon the classical hermeneutical and humanistic tradition of Gadamer than upon postmodernism. Like Altieri, Ricoeur concentrates on the formation of the self in dialogue with the texts of a tradition. A characteristic notion of his is the metaphor of a laboratory of forms. Texts, and narratives especially, function as a laboratory of forms in which attitudes for agency and for life may be probed by imagination. Ricoeur concentrates on narrative. Narrative and narrative identity have an important role in preparing the self for a full ethical responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Also the article of Th. M. van Leeuwen in this volume.

Altieri's 'universal intimacy' and Ricoeur's 'laboratory of forms', however, also express different approaches. The notion of intimacy suggests nearness, while the notion of a laboratory has the connotation of distance. Indeed, I think that Ricoeur is more cautious about the forces of distancing in the relation between text and reader. There are many reasons to assume a predominance of third person forms in literary texts. For example, even when the reader is directly addressed as 'you', this is not a direct second person address. The person who is addressed is the implied reader; and there is no direct identification between the implied reader and the real reader. On the contrary, I have argued in my publication that texts only create meaning through the difference between implied and real reader.

Because of this distancing, I would be careful not to stress the word 'intimacy' too much. The love of texts is always a love at a certain distance. Meanwhile, it remains important to emphasize that the narrative and literary third person form does not have a straight universal connotation, but receives its force from a certain affection. This dialectics of affective attraction and third person distancing creates a specific literary rationality.<sup>2</sup>

### *3. Fascination in interpretation*

With the sphere of affection, which surrounds the persuasiveness and rationality of texts, we encounter a new problem; namely, that the notion of authority is not suited to fully describe the relation between canonical text and reader. The notion of authority suggests that a text places imperatives upon the reader, either in the form of a concrete command (>behave like the characters presented'), or in a more abstract form, rather as an inexpressible force; for example, as a fundamental >I must', such as J. Hillis Miller has formulated as a kind of literary categorical imperative (Miller 1987). The latter form of an >I must' shows how little any concrete imperative is expressed anymore.

We should rather think of the relation between text and reader as one of negotiation, such as Altieri formulates, or even better, as one of seduction. The notion of negotiation suggests a kind of direct and expressible profit to be gained, which I think does not suit the interaction with texts, and with literary texts especially. Therefore, I opt for a notion that expresses the affective connotation I have treated before. For this purpose I introduce the notion of fascination in order to express a fundamental direction in interpretation. A literary work attracts a reader. It is by initial attraction that a person is invited to read, interpret, and live with a text, or a corpus of texts.

Does the term fascination as an element of hermeneutics suggest that interpretation is a sole matter of affection and seduction, grasping the naive reader in an ongoing firmer hold? If this criticism is true, the alternative of fascination as a term in a possible hermeneutic of canonical texts is even worse than the former notion of authority, which has been used so far. However, I think that the notion of fascination encloses an element of distancing, which is the seed of narrative and literary immanent rationality, without leading to absolute distance. I refer to the work of Nussbaum as an example of how the literary forces of seduction, fascination, and attraction shape a specific kind of literary knowledge. Philosophical reflection should face or confront this knowledge (Nussbaum 1990).

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<sup>2</sup> Ricoeur speaks of narrative intelligibility, and confines the notion of narrative rationality to the reflective forms of metalanguage in narrative: narratology and historiography. I would argue that narrative leads to forms of distancing and consideration by elements of the narrative itself, so that there is at least a rudimentary form of reflection and rationality in narrative (cf. Hettema 1996: 306).

There may be good reasons for investigating the notion of fascination in literary hermeneutics. Such an investigation throws more light upon the subject matter of canonicity than the mere notion of authority might do. One might argue about the extent to which an investigation from the perspective of fascination contradicts the hermeneutical reflection of tradition and authority. Again I refer to Nussbaum, who accounts for several options in the relations between philosophy and literature in the course of her own work (Nussbaum 1990: 50-53). From a philosophical encompassment of literature, through an opposition of philosophy and literature, she has finally arrived at a mutual completion of philosophy and literature.

However, does such a contribution from the field of literary hermeneutics suffice in theological hermeneutics? One may imagine that in the current philosophical climate the notion of fascination replaces authority in the literary field; but in the field of religion and theology the notion of authority has a much stronger force. Still, it must not be thought impossible to express the aspect of fascination in religion. For an example of this, I turn to Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* (Otto 1917). Everyone will know the famous dictum that the numinous, the sacred, the pre-personal religious phenomenon, is described as a *mysterium* both *tremendum* and *fascinans*. The sacred is *tremendum*: it leads to deep awe, it has overwhelming majesty, and it displays a demonic, strong energy. The sacred is a mystery that cannot be captured anyhow. However, the sacred is also *fascinans*: it is attractive, fascinating. It is this element of fascination that leads human beings to praise, to liturgy, and to remembrance. Nevertheless, even in shaping these attitudes of approach, the fascinating numinous remains somewhat at a distance, it is something *Unheimliches*. It is important to note that the chapter on the *fascinans* in Otto's book ends with a description of the sacred as *deinos*, frightening, and closes with quotations from Goethe on *das Ungeheure, das Unfaßliche*.

I want to use the *fascinans* in Otto's phenomenology of the sacred as a model term in describing a hermeneutic of canonical texts. A canonical text has a strong attraction, but it also has a strong movement of non-identification, incomprehensibility. Still, this does not impede the reader from developing an attitude of reverence, that is, of an interpretation that recognizes the attraction and the non-identification of the work. What makes this conception of literary fascination different from the traditional univocal, authoritative address of a text is the irreducible plurality. The canonical text is *deinos*, embarrassing, Dionysian. It is exactly this frightening plurality that attracts the reader.

Otto's use of the *fascinans* at least reveals to us the possibility of applying the notion of fascination to theology. I use his approach as an initial draft in a theological hermeneutic of canonicity. Without pretending to be exhaustive, I would like to add four facets to Otto's account.

First, the position of the persons who are fascinated has to be taken into account. Otto starts from a phenomenological perspective, taking the religious as his object. More attention should be paid to the recipient of the religious sphere. At this point, a theological hermeneutic should, more than in literary hermeneutics, stress the role of the religious community. The fascination of a religious canon takes place in the liturgy and interpretation of a group. Receiving the fascination of a religious canon is not an individual event. The fascination of a canon can be raised by a communal practice of study and celebration; the individual fascination can be corrected by reference to a common tradition.

Second, the role of temporality must be considered. This aspect follows from our first point: a religious community is a tradition; it has a history, a position in the present, and a direction to the future. The fascination of a canon comes forth from the past of a tradition, and has claims to the present and future of a tradition. Though this fascination may have a general flavour, its chronology is dependent upon the chronological experience of a certain tradition.

Moreover, the fascination of a canon can be expressed in terms of what I would call the qualitative dimensions of temporality. The fascination of a canon is a time-experience of concentration, of elevation, or perhaps even of disorientation in time.

Third, the question of rationality arises again. We relate this question to the aspect of temporality. The claim of rationality of a canon has a chronological aspect: it may grow in time. It is not an attitude of autonomous reasoning, but a practical rationality, a *phronesis*, a seeking of the golden mean. This rationality cannot be formulated a priori; it can only be developed in interacting with canonical texts. It is the rationality of Odysseus on his journey, who is directed in thought and action by a well-described aim, and searches a mean between the fascination of the Scylla and Charybdis, in order to reach his purpose.

Finally, the relation between fascination and authority asks for closer examination. The notion of authority may be divided into at least four components: the authority of the tradition behind a text, the text level itself, the canonical level of a whole of texts, and the ecclesiastical level (Dunn 1982). For at least the second and third level, I would suggest that the notion of fascination is a more prolific notion for describing the claims and impact of a canon than the notion of authority.

Instead of viewing fascination and authority as alternatives in the task of interpreting a religious canon, it is perhaps better to examine their interaction. May, for example, authority at the first three levels be considered to be sedimented fascination? I consider it to be the task of theological hermeneutics to explore the wide range of canonicity, which is only hinted at by the notions of authority and fascination.

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