

Preaching about Stewardship: An Encounter with Jesus in the World “in front of” the Synoptics

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Abstract

In an earlier essay, I offered some reflections on preaching about stewardship from the Synoptic gospels along with a brief specimen of practice.¹ That essay spoke to a particular homiletical scenario, but it opened onto broader issues concerning the move from text to sermon. This essay will go “under the hood” and discuss in greater detail two aspects of the hermeneutical theory that informed that earlier essay. The simplest and clearest way to accomplish this will be to re-present that earlier essay punctuated with a pair of excursuses that unpack the theory behind it. In what follows, I will comment on 1) the notion of a world projected “in front of” the text, and 2) the genre description “realistic narrative” and its implications for understanding the nature of the world projected in front of the Synoptic gospels.

Editor’s Note: This article is a theoretical expansion of Lance Pape’s thoughtful reflection on the practice of topical preaching published in this journal in Spring 2014.

The argument of this essay grows out of wrestling with a request by my own denomination's Center for Faith and Giving to lecture on the subject "Preaching on Stewardship throughout the Christian Year."² Specifically, the question addressed here is, "How might the preacher think with integrity about the call to prioritize a topic such as 'stewardship,' if 1) the preacher is committed on theological grounds to preaching that privileges the itinerary of meaning that emerges from the biblical text; and 2) the Synoptic Gospels, for example, are not, in the first place, about 'stewardship'?" Although the specific case I address here relates to preaching on the topic of stewardship from the Synoptic Gospels, the hope is that the hermeneutical approach developed may also prove helpful generally in relation to the tension between the preacher's desire to prioritize the agenda of the biblical text and calls for a more topical approach.

*Preaching under the "Vow of Obedience"*³

In order to lay the groundwork for an argument about the special case of preaching on the theme of stewardship from the Synoptic Gospels, it will be helpful very briefly to sketch a framework for thinking about a "typical" text-to-sermon process, i.e., one that is not concerned with prioritizing a pre-decided topic. The goal in this section is not to argue a case, but to supply a summary that can serve as a baseline for one understanding of the text-to-sermon process. Then it will be possible to extend this thinking toward preaching on a "topic" without betraying one's commitment to privilege the biblical text.

On any given Sunday the preacher stands up from the midst of the congregation, takes the witness stand, and offers her testimony concerning an eventful encounter in the world projected in front of the biblical text. In other words, although the sermon itself is a world-projecting "text,"⁴ it is not a discourse generated in perfect creative freedom. Rather, the preacher constructs the sermon under a self-conscious debt to something that precedes the preaching moment: an encounter "in front of" a canonical text.⁵ Ideally, this encounter emerges out of a close reading that 1) is critically informed, 2) is in continuity with—not to say conformity to—the tradition, and 3) strives to experience vicariously the issue of the text on behalf of a particular congregation. On this view, the task of the preacher is to become an exceptionally competent surrogate reader adventuring in the world in front of the biblical text on behalf of the community of faith; then, in turn, the task is to shape the language of the sermon in such a way that it recapitulates that eventful encounter.

Excurses: The world "in front of" the text

Paul Ricoeur's notion of a world projected "in front of" the text is an attempt to gather up into a single image a cluster of hermeneutical insights about the locus of textual meaning, and the phenomenology of reading. In order to clarify what Ricoeur is getting at, it will be helpful to distinguish this approach from other ways of understanding textual meaning.

To speak about a hermeneutical encounter “in front of” a text is, in the first place, to challenge the common assumption that texts refer by pointing “back” to a temporal past hidden “behind” them. In the case of a naïve reading, this may be a matter of uncritically accepting the past tense of narration at temporal face value: the verbs speak of action in the past, and it stands to reason that the issue of the text is, simply, what happened in the past. In the case of historical criticism, the text is viewed through a more sophisticated lens, but the focus is still on the past. The historical critic construes the text as an evidential artifact produced in the past, and therefore capable of supplying clues about the circumstances of its production. For biblical studies, it is easy to see how historical criticism can become a strategy for pivoting away from the supernaturalism that is so troubling to the modern sensibility, toward the more manageable project of sleuthing out what is “really” going on behind the text—a space that is both obscured and unwittingly betrayed by the text. Here the referential function of the text is not as straightforward as in the case of a naïve reading, but the text is still taken as a window into past happenings and the locus of textual meaning is still taken to be the world “behind” the text.

With respect to historical criticism, Ricoeur would not wish to deny the legitimacy of employing a text for the purpose of historical investigation. The words of a text “come out of a head, not a hat,” after all, and those trying to reconstruct the past are surely justified in taking any text as a clue about the individual or community that produced it. But it is reductive to insist that this is the only or even the most interesting thing one can do with a text. The historian assumes that to “explain a text...means primarily to consider it as the expression of certain socio-cultural needs and as a response to certain perplexities well localized in space and time.”⁶ But just as New Criticism problematized the assumption that authorial intention behind the text is the true measure of textual meaning,⁷ Ricoeur doubts that the meaning of a text is exhausted in terms of its “intelligibility from its connection to the social conditions of the community that produced it or to which it was destined.”⁸ For Ricoeur, historical expertise is valuable because it enhances our competence as readers and funds a more robust encounter with the text on its own terms; but he rejects the idea that engaging a text meaningfully is reducible to exploring the world that produced it. The understanding at stake when we engage a text from the past is not, primarily, an understanding about the past.

If the meaning of a text is not primarily about its author, or the world that produced it, where should meaning be sought?

The sense of a text is not behind the text, but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but something disclosed. What has to be understood is not the initial situation of discourse, but what points towards a possible world, thanks to the non-ostensive reference of the text.⁹

And again:

[W]hat has to be appropriated is the meaning of the text itself, conceived in a dynamic way as the direction of thought opened up by the text. In other words, what has to be appropriated is nothing other than the power of disclosing a world that constitutes the reference of the text.¹⁰

For Ricoeur, textual meaning is activated in front of the text in the moment of reading. And because that meaning is a matter of appropriation through reading, it must be admitted that the meaning generated is, in some strong sense, about the reader. Yet in rejecting the claim that texts signify by referring “back” to the history or authorial intention “behind” them, Ricoeur is *not* advocating a relocation of textual meaning all the way “forward” to the reader exclusively.¹¹ To do so would be to deny that the text proposes anything more than an opportunity, a pretext, for restating what the reader brings *a priori* to the encounter with the text. Rather, by speaking of a “possible world” disclosed “in front of” a text, he invites us to imagine the reader being drawn into a space that partakes both of the textual itinerary of meaning, and the reading subject’s own capacity to appropriate what she finds there. Reflecting specifically on biblical narrative, Ricoeur describes this synergy in terms of the intersection of two worlds:

[T]he meaning of a narrative . . . occurs at the intersection between the world of the text and the world of the readers. It is mainly in the reception of the text by an audience that the capacity of the plot to transfigure experience is actualized. By the world of the text I mean the world displayed by the text in front of itself, so to speak, as the horizon of possible experience in which the work displaces its readers. By the world of the reader I mean the actual world.¹²

At the intersection of these two worlds, a hermeneutical space opens at the moment of cooperative reading. In this “space” the reader is invited to move and explore new possibilities—to encounter what is more than the self and to risk becoming a new self. In other words, for Ricoeur, to speak of a textual world is to name the immersive, immediate, and pervasive new options that show themselves in the encounter with the language of the text. It is an attempt to indicate the way a text mediates access to “something more” than one is able to achieve independently through reflection on experience. The world in front of the text is not a window into other times, places, and events; it is a present alternative to the reader’s prior settled construal of life and its possibilities—an alternative world that “. . . incites the reader . . . to understand himself or herself in the face of the text and to develop, in imagination and sympathy, the *self* capable of inhabiting this world by deploying his or her ownmost possibilities there.”¹³

Anyone who has had the experience of becoming immersed in a good novel can appreciate what Ricoeur is talking about. As one opens the book, and thinks along with the words on the page, a remarkable transformation occurs. The language immediately founders in relation to the ostensive domain around you. The sentences predicate boldly of agents and action, but they have no apparent purchase upon one’s physical surroundings—the comfortable chair, the reading light, the night sounds, the neighbor walking his dog outside the window—all these continue, unperturbed by this insistence of discourse that so-and-so does such-and-such. Language has apparently come unhinged; it revs impressively, but unproductively, a linguistic engine seemingly unburdened by any engagement with reality through the gears of reference. But human consciousness does not tolerate such incongruities for long.¹⁴ Indeed, the ineluctable pull of discourse in consciousness is toward both sense and reference, and so, for the cooperative reader who follows the direction of

thought offered by the text, a space opens up—a space in which the language of the text will have its way. This is an act of imagination, of course. But the things that happen in this space are far from imaginary. For suddenly, here is this powerful insight, this palpable revulsion, this augmented awareness, this subtle subversion, this terror, awe, embarrassment, and fondness—a very real sense in which the reader is transported, shown something, enlarged, given access to a way of being that was not available or present apart from this encounter with this carefully crafted language. And having been shown this new world—Ricoeur has summarized its effect as “the shock of the possible”¹⁵—things will not be as they were. Even as the book closes again, and its projected world collapses—instantly gives sway in consciousness to the familiar ostensive domain—there is the powerful sense that something remains fundamentally changed for the reader. The world of objects is unaffected by the adventure in the world in front of the text, but one thing is different, and that is the reader. Her consciousness has been exploring that other space in front of the text. And if the consciousness of the reader has been shaped in some way by an encounter in the world in front of the text, then all things are new, for she now enjoys new options for being in relation to the world of the reading lamp, and the night sounds, and especially the neighbor. It is this phenomenology of reading that applies not only to narrative but also to any genre, literary or otherwise, which leads Ricoeur to assert: “for me, the world is the ensemble of references opened up by every kind of text, descriptive or poetic, that I have read, understood and loved.”¹⁶

Much more could be said to flesh out this understanding of the text-to-sermon process, but this is enough to bring into clearer view the problem with superimposing a topical agenda like “stewardship” on this process. Meaning is negotiated between the congregation’s situational concerns (achieved by proxy through the preacher’s “surrogacy”) and the text’s own agenda, but when read under the “vow of obedience”¹⁷ the text pushes back against any categorical attempt to pre-decide the question of theme. By gift, training, and commission, preachers are exceptionally competent readers, and the power of the text to make its own proposal is intensified in direct proportion to such competence. As a strong reader on behalf of the many, it is the preacher’s work to display, explore, and interact with the world proposed by the biblical text. A seriously imaginable new way of being that is commensurate with that strange new world is always the “topic.”

Honoring the World in Front of the Synoptics

By limiting the case to the Synoptic Gospels it will be possible to frame this hermeneutical problem with greater conceptual precision. The preacher’s first task is to display, explore, and interact with the world in front of the biblical text, and the nature of that world is, in the first place, a function of genre.¹⁸ Paul Ricoeur’s phenomenology of reading and the notion of a textual world is not a case of special pleading on behalf of canonical texts. There is nothing mystical about the capacity of the Gospels to display a world. Chili recipes, lawnmower manuals, and letters to the

editor all project worlds of various sorts. The important question is: What is the genre of—and therefore, what is the distinctive nature of the world projected in front of—a text like Mark, Luke, or Matthew?

Although the matter is contested, Hans Frei has proposed one particularly compelling answer. Building on the work of Erich Auerbach, Frei used the genre descriptor “realistic narrative,” and argued that the Synoptics are a bit like a modern novel.¹⁹ They are stories that function primarily to render the identity of their protagonist by depicting what he says, does, and suffers in “fit” or “realistic” relation to his circumstances. In the process of telling what he does, says, and suffers, the story makes this character available to the cooperative reader. In other words, Frei is making the rather astonishing proposal that the Synoptic Gospels are about Jesus—not in the sense of offering accurate historical reports, but rather in the sense of bearing adequate poetic testimony to his unique and unsubstitutable identity.

Excurses: “Realistic” narrative

In his classic work, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Hans Frei offers a hermeneutical proposal that turns on claims about some distinctive qualities of biblical narrative organized under the genre description “realistic narrative.” This constructive proposal is best understood against the backdrop of the hermeneutical disposition he critiqued. Frei argues that, in the wake of the Enlightenment, the interpretation of biblical narrative tends to go astray because of a genre mistake—a fundamental misunderstanding of literary form. Broadly, this unfortunate “eclipse” takes two forms.

On the one hand are those who mistakenly assume that the Synoptic gospels, for example, are meaningful because they refer back to the history “behind” the text. This is a misreading shared in common by interpreters across the theological spectrum. Both the fundamentalist who is fully convinced that Luke is an accurate report of past happenings, and the historical critic who questions its accuracy, agree that historical accuracy is the right measure of its meaningfulness. For both of these readers, the biblical text stands or falls on its ability to refer back to the history behind it.

On the other hand are those who seek the meaning of biblical narrative “above” the text. On this reading, the Bible refers not “back” toward history, but “up” toward a set of religiously significant ideas. This referent “above” the text may be understood as an abstractable moral content—a set of good ideas about how all people ought to live. Or, it may be conceived as a series of insights into authentic existence encoded within the Bible’s mythological language. In both cases, the reader is in pursuit of a higher meaning, and the interpretive assumption is that these stories are really about something other than what they appear, on the surface, to be about.

Both of these broad approaches share the reading strategy of seeking the meaning of biblical narrative as a function of its reference to things outside the text. As the Enlightenment and its new historical sensibility gained traction, some interpreters sought to establish that biblical narrative

could be trusted as a rigorous chronicle of past happenings (historical/ostensive reference). Others no less committed to the Bible's significance and authority abandoned the project of defending its historical accuracy, and sought its religious significance as a source of moral ideas or authentic modes of being (ideational and, later, existential reference). But, according to Frei, all of these approaches overlook, or "eclipse," a critical feature of the text itself.

Drawing on the work of Erich Auerbach,²⁰ Frei insists that close readers of the Bible must come to terms with something about the shape of biblical narrative that resists such reading strategies. While some kinds of narratives, myths for example, seem to beg to be read as cyphers pointing beyond themselves to some other frame of reference, key biblical narratives tend to invite, through their distinctive formal qualities, a different mode of reading. The Synoptic gospels do not present as a code to be deciphered but as a narrative that draws the reader into its own thick web of signification:

For whatever the situation that may obtain in other types of texts, in narrative of the sort in which character, verbal communications, and circumstances are each determinative of the other and hence of the theme itself, the text, the verbal sense, and not a profound, buried stratum underneath constitutes or determines the subject matter itself.²¹

Frei's argument is that this is a quality to be discovered within the text itself, and not merely a decision imposed upon it from the outside. To seek the meaning of biblical narrative in some external domain—whether the history behind it, or in a realm of religiously significant ideas above it—is to run roughshod over the clues the text itself gives about how it should be read. In biblical narrative, "[n]either character nor circumstance separately, nor yet their interaction, is a shadow of something else more real or more significant."²²

To take an analogous case, one ought not to prejudice the reading of a realistic novel by superimposing an agenda that demands that one always be on the lookout for some "higher" or "deeper" meaning, nor would one insist that a novel fails to signify because it does not accurately report on historical happenings. A realistic novel is "about" precisely what it seems to be about: its characters and all that they do, say, and suffer in fit relation to the circumstances in which they find themselves. Likewise, biblical narrative, when read on its own terms, invites a similar kind of reading. Frei simply equates verbal sense and reference, and so discourages the search for reference outside the framework of the story itself. This comparison to the realistic novel is one that Frei himself encouraged: "There really is an analogy between the Bible and a novel writer who says something like this: I mean what I say whether or not anything took place. I mean what I say. It's as simple as that: the text means what it says."²³

But if textual meaning is not a function of historical or ideational reference, what kind of meaning is at stake in a text like the gospel of Matthew? Building on the identity theory of Gilbert Ryle, Frei argued that the Synoptic gospels function to render the unique and unsubstitutable identity of their protagonist, Jesus Christ. Ryle claimed that the modern habit of taking actions as derivative of an essential identity hidden deep within the psyche is backward. It is more correct, he argued, to think of enacted intentions as themselves constitutive of human identity. As it happens,

enacted intentions as identity is a match for the kind of testimony Frei thought the realistic narratives of the canonical gospels supply. If there is a sense in which a person simply *is* what he says, does, and suffers in relation to his circumstances, then a story that traffics in precisely those categories—a history-like story about what Jesus says, does, and suffers may adequately render his identity. In his discussion of Karl Barth’s way of reading biblical narrative, Frei’s Yale colleague David H. Kelsey explained the kind of reading Frei had in mind:

There is another way in which biblical narratives may be used to authorize theological proposals. It consists in construing the narratives as “identity descriptions.” Narrative can “render” a character. A skillful storyteller can make a character “come alive” simply by his narration of events, “come alive” in a way that no number of straight-forward propositional descriptions of the same personality could accomplish. He can bring one to know the peculiar identity of the one unique person. Moreover, what one knows about the story’s central agent is not known by “inference” from the story. On the contrary, he is known quite directly in and with the story, and recedes from cognitive grasp the more he is abstracted from the story.²⁴

The identity of Jesus, which the quests for the historical Jesus have sought “behind” the biblical accounts, Frei sought within and in terms of those accounts. For Frei, the gospels show us Jesus, not in the mode of supplying a series of true propositions about the Jesus of history, but in the mode of storied testimony to his true identity.

To put the matter in terms of the theoretical framework sketched earlier: What does the preacher adventuring in the world in front of, say, Mark encounter? The answer is that there is a *person* in there—not a high-minded ethical concept, but a person: Jesus. Furthermore, this general literary claim about the function of realistic narrative takes on special resonance when applied to the specific situation of a community that reads these texts under the conviction that the identity rendered in the narrative is not merely a fictional character, or a historical curiosity, but a living presence somehow present in the midst of the gathered community in the power of the Spirit. For the Christian preacher, the encounter in the world in front of these texts is an encounter with a living presence.²⁵

One important ramification of this claim is that the Gospels are not about “stewardship,” or “faith and giving,” or even something as theological as “generosity.” For that matter, they are not about any abstract principal, such as “limit experience,” or abstract virtue—not even one that sounds distinctively Christian, such as “sacrificial love.” The Gospels are not about any of these universal concepts that well-meaning people have tried to claim they are about while attempting to domesticate the scandal of the Christian gospel by wrangling it over to the more respectable side of Lessing’s ditch.

The Gospels are not about stewardship or generosity—unless at its secret heart true “generosity” is not a concept, but a person. The Gospels are not about a person who embodies pre-understood concepts, but rather are about a unique identity that is itself constitutive of the Christian understanding of virtue. This is not a trivial distinction.

The scandal of Christian claims about Jesus is *not* that Jesus was an especially moral and religious person. For example, the claim is not that Jesus was an especially loving person—as if we already know precisely what love is, and now we are simply asserting that Jesus meets the standard and so can be made serviceable as a good role model. The logic of Christian claims about Jesus is precisely the reverse. The claim is that we know what true love is only when we encounter this unique and unsubstitutable identity, Jesus Christ. In knowing him and experiencing his unique way of being in the world, God’s own loving being is disclosed and all pretenders to the throne are exposed. Or again, Jesus is not the exemplar of some previously established virtue called “generosity,” but rather we come to know what true generosity means just when we encounter this Jesus in whom God’s own generous being is disclosed, and all counterfeits exposed.

Preaching about Jesus and Money

In light of this analysis, one way to think about topical preaching on texts from the Synoptics is to ask not, “What did Jesus say about X?” but rather “What would it mean to ponder X in the presence of Jesus?” If the function of the text is to render the identity of Jesus, and if preaching properly conformed to the text recapitulates that textual world, then the sermon should not merely be *about* what Jesus says about a given topic, but should invite the church to think about the matter in the company of this Jesus. In other words, it would be a kind of hermeneutical violence to treat the Gospels as a collection of authoritative sayings about various topics that can be helpfully mined by the topical preacher for nuggets of wisdom. One can, without too much difficulty, imagine a literature well-suited to efficiently documenting large numbers of esoteric wise sayings from Jesus, but the canonical gospels are realistic narratives and their genre exercises constraints on the obedient reader. Sermons that take these texts seriously *as* stories will proffer an imaginative space into which the cooperative listener is invited to enter. In that space, new possibilities for understanding oneself in relation to some “topic” will emerge because the topic will appear in a new light in relation to the identity of Jesus Christ.

The following brief homiletical sketch—originally offered as a short “stewardship meditation”—may serve to demonstrate this approach to topical preaching from the Synoptics:

No Financial Wizard

Matthew 20:1-14

Little known fact about Jesus: not very good with money. Just not his thing.

I’ll give you an example. Take that story he liked to tell about the guy who kept going out to hire day-workers. The first group he hired early in the day with the promise to pay a fair wage for the day. No big deal, right? But the guy just can’t leave well enough alone. Every few hours he’s back in his pickup truck, driving around town. He’s hitting the usual spots looking for day-labor. Mid-morning he’s at the gas station picking up workers. He takes on a couple more down by the Whataburger at lunchtime. Later he’s out running errands and comes in with a couple of guys who

had quit looking for work altogether that day. He had to go and ask them if they wanted a job. The problem, as I expect you know, is that at the end of the day he paid them all a full day's wages—even those two guys who started working an hour before quitting time. Jesus loved that story, but it makes no fiscal sense. He would tell that one and then slap his knee and laugh. "It's just like that when my daddy's in charge!" Jesus would say.

He never seemed to understand that you'd go broke that way. Every now and then an MBA would be in the crowd and hear him tell that story and say something like, "Yeah, but pretty soon he's not going to be able to hire anyone in the morning. People will just come around after the heat of the day and sign on at the end for a little light work. It's not practical. He'll go out of business!" But Jesus never got it. Just a blank stare. And then after a minute, there'd be another story: "Did I ever tell you the one about the kid who wasted all his dad's money?" And off he would go.

Or consider the financial counseling Jesus gave to the man who asked him what life is all about: "If you wish to be perfect," Jesus said, "go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor; and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." It's no wonder that those who followed Jesus around soon found themselves homeless like him. They would point this out and he'd just throw up his hands, "Alright fine!" he'd say, "Let Judas handle the finances." Jesus was hopeless with money.

But to his credit Jesus did understand that this was a problem for others. When someone new would offer to come along with his gang he would tell them right up front that he was no financial wizard. I remember one guy said, "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus wanted him to be clear about what he was getting into. He had this little saying: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

You get the idea that a guy like Jesus could start off with everything, and wind up with nothing. It's just that way with some people: give them every advantage and they can find a way to blow it. Jesus started out in a part of town where the streets were so clean they shone like gold, and died without a shirt on his shredded back on a hill outside Jerusalem.

Some time later, the apostle invited the Corinthians to ponder this little known fact about Jesus as they passed the offering basket. Paul writes: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich."

Jesus is not very good with money. What are we who are pretty good with money supposed to make of all this?

Preaching that is properly conformed to the world in front of a narrative text will not be heavily didactic. In the case of the Synoptics, this is because realistic narrative is about encountering a person, not assenting to propositions about what one ought to do. In a real sense, both the text and the sermon are not about money at all, but about this Jesus and his unique way of being in the world. In this example, the sermon ends with a serious kind of wondering about this peculiar identity Jesus, and how it might transform us to confess this Jesus as Lord. The hope and trust is that by getting in touch with that winsome identity, our thinking about everything—including money—may be transformed.

Notes

1 Pape, Lance. "Talking about Money in the Presence of Jesus: Biblical Hermeneutics and the Call for Topical Preaching." *Practical Matters* 7 (2014), <http://practicalmattersjournal.org/issue/7/practicing-matters/talking-about-money-in-the-presence-of-jesus>.

2 The assumptions behind the assigned title were as follows: 1) the Christian's proper disposition toward money is a topic that ought not be addressed only during a fall "campaign" during which the church tries to "make its budget" (on the model of secular fundraising drives); indeed, 2) stewardship should be integrated into the church's ongoing project of theological reflection and ethical formation; and finally, 3) opportunities to address it will naturally arise in the course of preaching the Revised Common Lectionary if the preacher is sensitive to this need (and is not actively avoiding the subject).

3 The understanding of preaching sketched in this section is indebted to the work of Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). For a discussion of the Ricoeurian theoretical underpinnings of this approach, see Lance B. Pape, *The Scandal of Having Something to Say: Ricoeur and the Possibility of Postliberal Preaching* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013).

4 Note that the designation "text" does not depend upon the use of a sermon manuscript, nor is it logically reducible to the semantic augmentations that emerge from the capacity of written discourse to perdure and signify independent of its author's intentions, and the circumstances of its production. The sermon functions as a world-projecting poetic "text" in the Ricoeurian sense not because it is inscribed, but rather because it is *wrought*, i.e. constructed out of carefully chosen language arranged under and empowered by the constraints of genre. *Ibid.*, 118.

5 "To speak of a textual world is to name how immersive, immediate, and pervasive for the reader are the new options for being that open through an encounter with the language of the text." For an account of the phenomenology of reading implicit in the notion of "entering the world projected in front of the text," see *ibid.*, 79-80.

6 Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976): 90.

7 "One must ask how a critic expects to get an answer to the question about intention. How is he to find out what the poet tried to do? If the poet succeeded in doing it, then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence, and the critic must go outside the poem-for evidence of an intention that did not become effective in the poem." W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954): 4.

8 Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*: 90.

9 *Ibid.*, 82.

10 *Ibid.*, 94.

11 "[By speaking of appropriation] are we not putting the meaning of the text under the power of the subject

who interprets it? This objection may be removed if we keep in mind that what is “made one’s own” is ... not the intention of another subject, presumably hidden behind the text, but the project of a world, the proposition of a mode of being in the world that the text opens up in front of itself by means of its non-ostensive references.” Ibid.

12 Paul Ricoeur, “Toward a Narrative Theology: Its necessity, Its Resources, Its difficulties,” in Mark I. Wallace, ed. *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995): 240.

13 Ricoeur, “Naming God,” in *Figuring the Sacred*: 232.

14 “My contention is that discourse cannot fail to be about something.” Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*: 36.

15 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1, trans. Kathleen Mclaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 79.

16 Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*: 37.

17 “Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience.” Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: an Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Dennis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970): 27.

18 “[T]he notion of a text absolutely free, absolutely open to us, in which we can ‘produce’ meaning, is—as most of its proponents allow—a utopian fiction. There are constraints that shadow interpretation; and the first is genre.” Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979): 18.

19 Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). For a thorough and illuminating appropriation of Frei’s hermeneutical project for homiletics, see Charles L. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei’s Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

20 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton, N: Princeton University Press, 1953).

21 Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974): 280.

22 Frei, *Eclipse*: 14.

23 Hans W. Frei, “Response to ‘Narrative Theology: An Evangelical Appraisal,’” in George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, eds., *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993): 208.

24 David H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975): 39.

25 As an aside, this insight opens onto the question of the poetics of preaching. When the preacher “takes the witness stand,” the testimony offered is not reducible to “just the facts about the events of the night of the seventeenth.” Rather, the testimony given concerns an encounter with a living presence and the preacher is in the situation of mustering all the linguistic resources at her disposal in a bid to keep faith with the one concerning whom she must bear witness.