

# Postmodernism, History, and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interacting with the Thought of Paul Ricoeur

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Postmodern post-history ideas are not only having an impact on the disciplines of history and literature, but also present a challenge for Biblical hermeneutics, theology, and language. This paper aims to engage various post-history perspectives, and with help from the insights of the notable French thinker Paul Ricoeur, to offer viable alternatives, and then to apply these to the Biblical text.

## Introduction

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his thought-provoking novel *Nausea*, brilliantly presents the view that there is a radical contrast between living and telling.<sup>1</sup> Living, for Sartre's narrator Antoine Roquentin, is an actual moment of present experience, while telling is an inimical step away from that experience, yet also a temptation to make sense out of a chaotic set of unexplainables that characterize existence.

Roquentin gives the distinct impression in *Nausea* that telling, memory, and history are fantasy – actual present living is what counts as real. He believes that the only *real* real to be had in this world, where one is continually enchanted by the unreal fabrications and reveries of a narrated past, is the present. The most serious problem for Roquentin however, is that this real is merely a series of disconnected incidences. Nothing in life seems to fit

together. Hours, days, months, and years persist with no genuine beginning or end: monotone. Out of this friction between the *real* real and the empty seduction of the unreal, develops the novel's potent theme: living is like being covered with a blustery cloud of nausea, which seeps into every area of a random existence, and telling, is even worse.

Faithfully keeping track of his present life in a journal, Antoine Roquentin is also involved in the task of writing a history book, which he cannot ultimately accomplish in good conscience. Roquentin recognizes the book has a different set of requirements than his diary ramblings. The latter are a string of irreconcilable moments with no sequential and sensible flow, while the former seeks to discover direction, purpose, and continuity. History however, despite this different orientation, borders on pure imagination: Roquentin fears he merely creates the facts

of his historical research.<sup>2</sup> Why is living, queries Roquentin, so unlike telling? People are duped in that they are always telling stories, surrounded by stories, and seek to live life as a told story.<sup>3</sup> But living always trumps over telling. For Roquentin, there are no true stories. He confesses he would make a dreadful witness, as there is no way of discerning an event from the drone of daily existence. His conclusion is that one must choose: live or tell.<sup>4</sup>

Since the writing of *Nausea* the urgency of this discussion has only been reinforced by recent developments in the discipline of history, where "telling" has been further undermined by new forms of suspicion, which put into question the capability of history to inform us about the veracity of the past. While the old modernist notion of history as uninterpreted and neutral brute facts has rightly been critiqued and surpassed, does this mean that our sole option, as represented by some influential postmodern perspectives today, is to admit that Sartre's Roquentin had it right after all? In response to this problematic, which has multi-disciplinary implications, we intend to explore the extremely significant and vitally essential question: what is history?

### Postmodern Post-History

Sartre's *Nausea* captures and expresses crucial questions for understanding our contemporary context. How are we to view the past? Does history have any traction and force for living? In the wake of Jean-François Lyotard's volume, *The Postmodern Condition* and its 'incredulity toward metanarratives,' a large fissure of uncertainty broke open in many disciplines, including history.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, in addition to the rise of a post-Christian development in Western culture, one of

the most recent "posts" to add to the ever growing list is post-history. A diversity of postmodern scholars would be in broad agreement with the notion that the only past we have is the one we manufacture from the present.<sup>6</sup> A specific link between this perspective and the one of Sartre's Roquentin is found in postmodern historians and philosophers of history who argue that written narratives are always an inordinate distortion of the past. In facing the anxiety of living, we create a past. Keith Jenkins, one of the most ardent defenders of this point of view, writes:

the idea of the historical past can thus be considered as just one more example of the many imaginaries we have fabricated to make some sense of the apparent senselessness of existence and to protect us from the possible trauma occasioned by having to face radical finitude.<sup>7</sup>

Jenkins, it seems, has much in common with Roquentin. In our postmodern context the notion of any 'true' past is like an illusion. Metanarrative and academic histories, according to Jenkins, are both dead.<sup>8</sup> It is the present and only the present that accounts for the past. All we have and have ever had are present versions ad infinitum. Insisting that we are faced with an ever growing and endless interpretative freedom regarding history, Jenkins argues we must accept a deep and total uncertainty concerning its veracity.<sup>9</sup> We are always and inevitably required to make decisions and choices about the past and in so doing, necessarily force our concerns and interests upon it. The past, in itself, has nothing significant attached to it. Jenkins proclaims:

The past contains nothing of intrinsic value, nothing we *have* to be loyal to, no facts we *have* to find,

no truths we *have* to respect, no problems we *have* to solve, no projects we *have* to complete; it is us who decide these things *knowing* – and if we know anything we know this – that there are no grounds on which we can ever get such decisions right.<sup>10</sup>

Hayden White, another influential contemporary historian involved in the post-history discussion, is concerned to replace any notions of epistemology and objectivity in history with aesthetics and structure. History, from this perspective, is created by literary art and transformed into literature: history is literary to the core and can only be considered from a literary, not an epistemological point of view. That is, a literary structuring or art inevitably shapes a recounting of the past and in so doing creates meaning the past in itself never has. When historians write narratives they have no choice but to impose a structure and plot, which then results in fictionalizing the narrative. White states:

.... there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.<sup>11</sup>

Writing a narrative about the past, according to White, constitutes possible objects of explanation and understanding. This constitution, however, is not to be thought of as found in real events in time, but appears only through a literary invention and a structuring of narrative. Yet it is the narrative telling that leaves us with a distortion of life in the past: narrative has a beginning, middle and end, which thereby alienates it from the authenticity

of real events. Living, as with Roquentin, is not a true or coherent story. White concludes:

What I have sought to suggest is that this value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary. The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, and reveries.<sup>12</sup>

White's complex taxonomy cannot be fully developed here.<sup>13</sup> Two of his major presuppositions are that the historian invents as much as finds, and that narratives are a mode of recounting, not a mode of discovery.<sup>14</sup> He views the historian as working with disordered and unrelated chronicle type data. The writer then imposes a sequential order, – beginning, middle, end, and an emplotment strategy, which may take the form of a romance – tragedy – comedy – satire. By virtue of this imposition of a form, which is the mode of explanation, moral meaning or content is attached to the narrative.<sup>15</sup> In White's point of view, a plot form or structure functions as a control model, a sort of pre-encoding, a metahistory.<sup>16</sup> This is because emplotting presides over and is that through which the historian is obliged to recount the story.

Post-history thinkers, such as Jenkins and White, are pessimistic about open avenues toward accessing the past. In their view, our present context and writing narratives necessarily function as defeaters of historical knowledge. Under the template of postmodern theory, 'new wave'<sup>17</sup> historians argue that a discovery of an accurate recounting of historical

events in time is an impossible task.<sup>18</sup> In this scenario, writing history has more to do with inventing meaning, than finding it. Any pursuit of the truth of historical occurrence in the past becomes highly dubious and history, understood as an epistemological enterprise, is under demolition.<sup>19</sup>

With these brief remarks in mind, we will now move on to further reflect upon and evaluate these ‘new wave’ proposals. Our main purpose in what follows is to interpret and apply the thought of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who is critical of post-history perspectives, and then to draw out several implications for biblical hermeneutics.<sup>20</sup>

### History and Historiography

Discussions concerning the truth value of history have had a long tradition, and as we have pointed out above, more recently postmodern ideas have broken onto the scene, creating and arguing for new ways of viewing history and historiography.<sup>21</sup> Disagreements flourish on this issue; however, we shall not respond here to the wide diversity of views represented. Rather, we wish to briefly address an important, though frequently neglected question which arises on this register and applies to all disciplines. What is history? An answer may appear obvious, until someone asks us to clarify and elucidate.

Elaboration of the historical rhythm of the text can be aided by considering the relation and distinction between history and historiography. The word history, from our perspective, has the capacity to refer to actual past events in time, while historiography is defined as the complex matter of interpreting and recounting a selection of these events thematically and configuring them into a written narrative.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, event and textual

representation of the past never have a one to one correspondence, yet this does not undermine the capacity of historiography to have historical credibility.

One response to postmodernism and its influence on historical questions has been for some scholars to claim that the text is history. Daniel Marguerat, in a discussion of postmodernism and historiography, argues that there is no history without the written plots and interpretations of the historian. He maintains that any distinction between history and written accounts of history has now been destroyed.<sup>23</sup> A somewhat similar view is advanced by Paul Veyne, who proposes a narrativist model of history that is plot-centered; there is no history without the writing of a plot.<sup>24</sup> History, Veyne contends, is made by the written construction of plots.<sup>25</sup>

Such notions of history and writing history are useful in pointing out the role of the historian as interpreter and the importance of narrative configurations, but they have the severe disadvantage of reducing history to interpretation and emplotment, hence devaluing any distinction between historical discourse and history.<sup>26</sup> How do we arrive at historical discourse, a selectively written account of history? There has been much debate on this particular issue and it is impossible to cover all the arguments here,<sup>27</sup> but we shall closely follow the insights of Paul Ricoeur’s work on this controversial aporia.<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur suggests a critical three-fold historiographical operation that comprises, at each level, enrichment and problematization.<sup>29</sup>

First, Ricoeur argues, we begin with an investigation of what we find in sources and documentation. These *detail* sources, for example, traces (marks left by people and things in passing through time), testi-

mony, and chronicles can be evaluated and to some degree verified as to their reliability. Sources are not, at this stage, what Ricoeur refers to as 'la connaissance historique' (historical knowledge). According to Ricoeur, on this level, historical occurrence has a twofold epistemological status: it brings about statements of details that can be affirmed or negated by testimony, trace, or documentation, and it plays a role in the overall explanation and narrative configuration, where it passes from the status of a verifiable occurrence to an interpreted occurrence. In spite of the instability of the relation between the occurrence and its documentation, there is no reason to assume that the occurrence was not an *actual* event in the world prior to its documentation.

Second, there is an explicative/comprehension level, which concerns not just 'who', 'where', and 'when', but 'why', 'to what effects', or 'results.' This level comprises such elements as social, political, or economic considerations that ripple out from an occurrence in the past. On this level, as Ricoeur points out, there are conflicting models of the *erklären* (explanation) and *verstehen* (understanding) of past occurrences as historical knowledge: some *explain* by subjecting the past to laws or regulations, others *understand* by connecting the past to teleology. The notions of epistemological value are attached to one or the other of these models of cultivating and articulating the past. In effect both attempt, albeit in different ways, to establish something of a scientific dimension of historical discourse through centering on understanding (Dilthey) or explanation (Hempel). However, in Ricoeur's view, the problematic is that explanation without understanding or understanding without explanation results in a truncated epistemolo-

gy. In the debate between these models, Ricoeur highlights the work of G. H. von Wright in *Explanation and Understanding*<sup>30</sup> (who situates the conflict in Plato and Aristotle). Von Wright attempts to synthesize the regulatory (laws) and the causal (teleological) in connection with human action. In finding such a point of view promising, Ricoeur ponders the following question: does a narrative ordering assure the unity of a mixed model?<sup>31</sup> This question leads us to the next stage of the historiographic operation.

Third, the interpreted sources and the explanations and understandings are configured in (re) writing a grand historiographical narrative,<sup>32</sup> which aims to be a representation of the past. This (re) writing representation is connected to memory, the intentionality of the historiographer, and the target of recounting truth about the past in dependence on the previous levels. At this point, the historiographical operation is brought to closure.<sup>33</sup> Ricoeur prefers the term 'représentance'<sup>34</sup> for the combined three level operation in order to emphasize that historical representation is working towards bringing to light the targeted reference. These three distinct, yet related levels of operation, offer a critical knowledge of the past.

Ricoeur's threefold notion of the historiographical operation shows that history and historical discourse are not to be equated. For Ricoeur, there is a behind the text or an outside the text that merits consideration in historical inquiry. Trace, testimony, and représentation, stand for something that took place outside the text.<sup>35</sup> While the behind or outside the text are not the only concerns in the interpretation of historical discourse, they nevertheless remain valid interests.<sup>36</sup> Historical occurrences only become historical discourse when they are written,

while history remains history even though it is not written down.<sup>37</sup> Thus, we are not merely interested in texts, but in a reliable interpretation of the historical character of the events which the texts represent.

As we have seen in the previous section, the disciplines of literature and modern literary criticism are having a marked impact on notions of history. One important reason for this is the contemporary emphasis on literature inaugurated by both French and Anglo-Saxon theorists.<sup>38</sup> Let's focus again, but now more particularly on a critical engagement with Hayden White, as his influence in this discussion is considerable. On the narrative level, according to White, the historian constructs narrative meaning through the chosen plot form or typology as a literary endeavor. This literary configuring gives the narrative a fictional content, while a reliable representation of events in the world pales into relative obscurity on the referent register of the grand narrative.<sup>39</sup>

The fact that narratives are constructed is not in dispute, yet there are questions concerning White's views. Why should narrative construction, which many scholars acknowledge, banish historical occurrence, sense and reference? Does narrative construction exclude a credible representation of the past?<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, why should one presuppose there is no narrative structure (beginning, middle and end), which a narrative may reflect, prior to its literary construction?<sup>41</sup> While appreciative of White's emphasis on the structured imagination and its correlation to creativity and form, Ricoeur remarks:

On the other hand, I regret the impasse that White gets caught up in in dealing with the operations of

emplotment as explanatory models, held to be at best indifferent as regards the scientific procedures of historical knowledge, at worst a substitutable for them. There is a true *category mistake* here which engenders a legitimate suspicion concerning the capacity of this rhetorical theory to draw a clear line between historical narrative and fictional narrative (*récit historique et récit de fiction*.)<sup>42</sup>

White's theory includes further drawbacks. He both neglects the realist dimension of fiction and stresses an almost exclusive focus on the choice of pre-narrative strategies and emplotment, to the detriment of a concern for the fidelity of a representation of the past.<sup>43</sup> One of the marked results of this strategy is that it becomes necessary to view historical discourse as constitutive of, rather than connected to, historical occurrence and life.<sup>44</sup>

Historical investigation and the view of historical discourse today have been strongly influenced by White's work. He has made a forceful contribution to moving historical discourse from the domains of history, literature, science, and epistemology, and locating it exclusively in the realm of literature. White relegates or reduces historical inquiry to a third level (in Ricoeur's operation) literary quest.<sup>45</sup> In so doing, White's views render it extremely difficult to draw distinctions between historical discourse and fiction. The major aporia that such an incapacity creates is that it puts in question the accessibility of the past. Ricoeur states:

... it is the relation between the organizing paradigms of the discipline of history and those which control the composition of literary fictions which has provoked a de-classification of history as know-

ledge with a scientific pretension and its reclassification as literary artifice, and in relation to this caused a weakening of epistemological criteria of differentiation between history proper and the philosophy of history.<sup>46</sup>

This brief examination, by and large focused on Ricoeur's interaction with White and contemporary scholarship, should not be read as merely a critique, but also as a means of conveying his own positive proposals. There is a clear indication of how, in Ricoeur's opinion, an over-determined literary focus has the tendency to reduce historical discourse to fictional literature and rhetorical strategies. He, as others, strongly argues for maintaining the distinction between historical discourse and fictional literature in that historical discourse has different concerns, referents, and targets. The reductionism of White and Jenkins brings with it an epistemological dilemma with respect to the fidelity of a *representation* of the past. Ricoeur's conflict with such scholarship has been underscored in showing that the literary-narrative turn, in this school of thought, is now more often concerned with literature and literary criticism, than it is with epistemology and objectivity. There is no question that the move towards narrative as a literary vehicle for recounting events of the past is valid,<sup>47</sup> but the perils of a declassification of historical discourse into fictional literature are troubling and therefore call for a vigilant epistemology.<sup>48</sup> Historical discourse is indeed literature, yet in Ricoeur's view, it is essential that we not abandon scientific investigation or critical analysis with respect to sources, explanations, and understandings, that pertain to questions of the past.<sup>49</sup>

The representation of the past is not a

copy or projection, a correspondence of mental image and something absent, but rather a something represented *standing in place of* that which once was and no longer is.

Two ideas are involved here: on one hand, the idea that a mark has been left by the passage of some being, on the other, the idea that this mark is the sign 'standing for' ('valant pour') the passage. The significance of the trace combines a relation of causality between the thing marking and the thing marked, and a relation of signification between the mark left and the passage. The trace has the value of effect-sign.<sup>50</sup>

In this sense, the trace does not belong to some form or expression of a naïve realism or idealism, but to what Ricoeur refers to as a 'critical realism', in this context, a 'profound analysis of what constitutes the intentionality of historical discourse.'<sup>51</sup> A *représentance* of the past is expected to be connected to reconstructions of actual occurrences, real people, and truthful circumstances.<sup>52</sup> This historical narrative articulation can be said to constitute a 'pact' between author and reader.<sup>53</sup> Historians, on this view, are not mere narrators, but argue a case for the actual occurrences and real people they attempt to represent. Historical discourse has a target — a reliable representation of the past. Ricoeur comments:

It is in no way my intention to cancel or to obscure the differences between history and the whole set of fictional narratives in terms of their truth-claims. Documents and archives are the 'sources' of evidence for historical inquiry. Fictional narratives, on the other hand, ignore the burden of providing evidences of that kind.

I should want to stress that as 'fictive' as the historical text may be,

its claim is to be a representation of reality. And its way of asserting its claim is to support it by the verificationist procedures proper to history as a science. In other words, history is both a literary artifact and a representation of reality. It is a literary artifact to the extent that, like all literary texts, it tends to assume the status of a self-contained system of symbols. It is a representation of reality to the extent that the world it depicts - which is the 'works world' - is assumed to stand for some actual occurrences in the 'real' world.<sup>54</sup>

In fictional literature, it can also be said, there is equally a 'pact' between author and reader, but in this case there is no expectation, nor demand, for the same level of an extra-linguistic *referent* on the narrative register. Thus, historical discourse and fiction are story, in that both are configured through imagination and emplotment, yet historical discourse cannot be reduced to fictional literature.<sup>55</sup> The field of operation for historical discourse, which has been developed in the previous pages, is obliged to include faithful representations of the past, not merely imagination, plot, and a literary form.

### **Biblical Hermeneutics**

Postmodern post-history theories have not only had an impact on the disciplines of history and literature, but they are connected to the discussion of biblical hermeneutics, language, and theology.<sup>56</sup> A hermeneutic non-realism posits the notion that text and reader are freed from any constraints of events in time that may have a bearing on interpretation.<sup>57</sup> When meaning is disconnected from historiographical representation, the possibility of subjectively objective knowledge of what once was comes undone.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to historical questions, bib-

lical interpretation today is heavily influenced by the relatively recent interest in literary criticism and narrative.<sup>59</sup> The narrative turn has become the object of intense debate. In the light of contemporary literary theories and notions of history promoted by 'new wave' historians, how are we to engage the biblical text? Do we interpret the Bible as 'historicized fiction,' 'fictionalized history,' or with another approach all together?<sup>60</sup> There are claims by some that the Bible is fictional in character, while others argue that biblical history and any conception of fiction are in total conflict.<sup>61</sup>

Ricoeur has given us a useful critique of 'new wave' proposals and provided helpful insights in the discussion above concerning history and historiography, but the matter before us now is to investigate how these would apply, albeit tentatively, to biblical hermeneutics. Frequently understood to be affirming different things on the subject of the Bible and biblical interpretation,<sup>62</sup> Ricoeur's general hermeneutical discussion of historical discourse and literature is nevertheless of value for maintaining that historical accounts have referents outside the text.<sup>63</sup> Working from this general hermeneutical perspective, one must not automatically reduce the biblical text to simply fictional literature.

To start with, Ricoeur strongly suggests that an intertextual approach is important for biblical hermeneutics.<sup>64</sup> This means that biblical narrative must be interpreted in relation to other biblical genres such as wisdom, hymn, prophecy, and so on.<sup>65</sup> Whether it be Exodus, Psalms, Isaiah, a gospel, or letter, each text has a temporal dimension and message that needs to be put into a historical, literary, and theological dialogue with the other. This hermeneutical perspective



orients the interpreter towards an investigation and evaluation of each text on a case-by-case basis in order to determine the author's literary act as expressed in the genre of the text.<sup>66</sup>

Several biblical texts, including Exodus and the gospels, vehemently announce that there is a theological dimension to history. As a listener to that which is recorded in the Scripture,<sup>67</sup> Ricoeur may be open to a view that the God who is named by the biblical text, does something outside the text, which is now a *représentance* in the text. Ricoeur observes:

... the naming of God in the resurrection narratives of the New Testament is in accord with the naming of God in the deliverance narratives of the Old Testament: God called Christ from the dead. Here, too, God is designated by the transcendence of the founding events in relation to the ordinary course of history.

In this sense, we must say the naming of God is first of all a moment of narrative confession. God is named in 'the thing' recounted. This is counter to a certain emphasis among theologies of the word that only note word events. To the extent that the narrative genre is primary, God's imprint is in history before being in speech. Speech comes second as it confesses the trace of God in the event.<sup>68</sup>

The historical character of the text is clear. Testimony to the Resurrection,<sup>69</sup> for example, requires the historical status: *something happened*, which left a trace, and was recorded in the narratives as an event in time. The gospel writers' interpretations concern that *which actually happened*.<sup>70</sup>

The witness is a witness to things that have happened. We can think

of the case of recording Christian preaching in the categories of the story, as narration about things said and done by Jesus of Nazareth, as proceeding from this intention of binding confession-testimony to narration-testimony.<sup>71</sup>

Numerous testimonies in the biblical text are not merely text, but they represent, stand for, and are a trace of God's activity in time in the real world.<sup>72</sup> Ricoeur has argued that the mark or trace of God in history is prior to it being recounted in a narrative.<sup>73</sup> Biblical historical narrative aims to be a representation of what is behind the text. He also draws from the prophetic tradition in addition to the gospel narratives for a notion of testimony. Historical occurrences of God's action have taken place and are witnessed to by the prophets. Prophetic moments are connected to historical moments – testimony is bound to confession and narration – in a motion from first Testament prophecy to second Testament gospel and letter.<sup>74</sup>

Ricoeur points out, for example, that the Christological kerygma is something 'which demands narrative.' In other words, there is something preceding that which is narrativized, something 'behind' or 'outside' the text. Ricoeur appeals to 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 'that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve,' arguing that the four aorist verbs show a provocation to narration.<sup>75</sup>

As I have already mentioned above, Ricoeur is often interpreted in a variety of ways on the question of biblical interpretation. He has explored the aesthetic narrative interests of the fictional dimension of the biblical text; however, he has also maintained an emphasis on the realism of

its historical event character.<sup>76</sup> One finds in his work an ongoing challenge to a postmodern non-referential literary focus on history and biblical narrative, combined with an illuminating interest in a representation of times past in the text.

This leads to three salient observations on how Ricoeur's work can offer a valuable response to postmodern post-history thinking about the biblical text. First, in contrast to a postmodern uncertainty pertaining to historical discourse and history, it can be argued that there is a real history outside the text and a scientific and epistemological pretension in writing about this. Second, while there is a marked literary aspect of historical discourse, a postmodern post-history declassification of historical discourse into fictional literature is untenable. A relation and distinction formulation, that takes into account imagination and emplotment on the one hand – and the grounds of an historical intentionality of representation that targets real people, events, and situations on the other, preserves the tension, while fending off polarizing tendencies. Third, there is a rapport between a general and biblical hermeneutics, in that both argue for a real world outside the text. We can carefully affirm and credibly defend the view that many parts of the Bible are concerned with historical discourse, which aim at recounting events that actually took place in time.

#### Notes

1. J-P. Sartre, *La nausée*, Paris: Gallimard, 1938; *Nausea*, trans. L. Alexander, (New York: New Directions, 1959.) We are indebted to M. Freeman, *Rewriting the Self. History, Memory, Narrative*, (London: Routledge, 1993) for some of these comments on *Nausea*.

2. *Nausea*, 39.

3. *Ibid.*, 39-40.

4. *Ibid.*, 39; 170-178. Ironically, at the end of the novel Roquentin ponders the question: might telling, in spite of its drawbacks, give him a story which will allow him to affirm his existence?

5. J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xxiv. See also, K. J. Vanhoozer, "Pilgrim's Digress: Christian Thinking on and about the Post/modern Way"; J. K. A. Smith, "A Little Story about Metanarratives:

#### Conclusion

We began this paper with provocative thoughts from Sartre's book *Nausea* and the problematic of living and telling. His narrator, Antoine Roquentin, forcefully puts forward the notion that living, as a present moment triumphs over all else. *Nausea* not only negates telling, but it reduces reality to a random set of sequences that lead to nothing. Why is living, queries Roquentin, so unlike telling?

This view, as we have seen, left the legacy of a strong polarization that surfaced, notably, in what we referred to as postmodern post-history. Present moments and literary structures in this perspective, it is argued, defy the reliability of knowledge of the past. Living is assumed to negate telling, as telling is a distortion connected to imaginative fantasy. In contrast, our contention is that an ontology and epistemology of telling cannot be denied its place in imaginative living. Historiographical narratives are configured by and out of something that precedes them. They are not distortions, but representations of life with aims, targets, and goals. Living and telling therefore should be understood as related and distinct, whereas reductionism, for *Nausea*, and postmodern post-history, is unfortunately all too often prominent when it comes to embracing and engaging the complexity of configuring time and action in living and telling.

Liotard, Religion, and Postmodernism Revisited”, 261-276 and M. Westphal, ”Onto-theology, Metanarrative, Perspectivism and the Gospel”, in M. Penner, ed. *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

6. K. Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 1999); H. Kellner, *Language and Historical Representation. Getting the Story Crooked* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989); H. White, *Metahistory, The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); F. Ankersmit, ”Historical Representation”, *History and Theory* 27 (1988), 205-228. As present representation becomes true history the hermeneutical concern is aesthetic, not epistemological. This means that the focus is entirely on the representation itself, rather than through it to the reality it targets.

7. Jenkins, *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity*, 14.

8. Jenkins, *Refiguring History. New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2003), 15-16. Some historians, argues Jenkins, still hopelessly aim for truth and objectivity in history: an epistemology. In his view they should abandon such pretensions and become happy relativists. Postmodernism, for Jenkins, goes far beyond a plurality of interpretations in that it undercuts any notions of form or content, making it impossible to say what history is.

9. Jenkins, *Refiguring History*, 10.

10. *Ibid.*, 29. Italics original.

11. White, ’The Historical Test as a Literary Artifact,’ in: *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, B. Fay, P. Pomper, R.T. Vann, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 15-33, esp. 16. (Italics his).

12. White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 1987, 24.

13. See A. Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997), 140-162, for a fuller introduction to White’s views.

14. White, ”Afterword”, in *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, V. Bonnell and L. Hunt, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1999, 315--324, argues that it is an illusion that ”facts” are discovered not constructed. N. Carroll, ’Interpretation, History and Narrative,’ in: *The History and Narrative Reader*, G. Roberts, ed. (London: Routledge, 2001), 246-265, esp., 251, usefully points out in respect to White’s view, ”The notion of *invention* here is a bit tricky and open to equivocation. In one sense, historical narratives are inventions, viz. in the sense they are made by historians; but it is not clear that it follows from this that they are *made-up* (and are, therefore, fictional).” (*Italics* and parenthesis his).

15. White, ”Narrativization” in *On Narrative*, W. J. T. Mitchell, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1981, 249-254, esp. 253: narrativization teaches about ”moral wisdom, or rather about the irreducible moralism of a life lived under the conditions of culture rather than nature ... narrative has the power to teach what it means to be *moral* beings (rather than machines endowed with consciousness).” (*Italics* and parenthesis his).

16. White, *Metahistory*. See Kellner, *Language*, 193-227, esp., 197 for a discussion of *Metahistory*. Kellner reads White’s worldview as centered on humanism. Historiography is about human choice and a fortification of human mastery, connected to rhetorical language power. Also, W. H. Dray, ”Narrative and Historical Realism”, in *The History and Narrative Reader*, 157-180, for an insightful discussion of White’s views.

17. Munslow, *Deconstructing*, 19, refers to ”new wave” historians, such as Hayden White and Keith Jenkins, who emphasize the form - content relation and the inescapable relativism of historical understanding.

18. D. Carr, ”Life and the Narrator’s Art”, in: *Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*, H. J. Silverman and D. Ihde, eds. (New York: State University Press of New York), 1985, 108-121, refers to this pejoratively as the ”standard” view today.

19. M. Stanford, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 227-263.

20. Ricoeur’s work is one of the most prominent enterprises to peruse for an investigation into the questions of history, narrative, and biblical hermeneutics, as his writings for the last two decades clearly attest. Ricoeur, *Temps et récit, I-III*, (Paris: Seuil, 1983-1985). (*Time and Narrative, I-III*, trans. K. McLaughlin and D. Pellauer, 1-2 and K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, 3, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988). ”Philosophies critiques de l’histoire: recherche, explication, écriture”, in: *Philosophical Problems Today 1*, G. Fløistad, ed. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994, 139-201). ”Philosophies”, has not, to my knowledge, appeared in English. The English translations for this work are my own. ”Biblical Hermeneutics”, *Semeia* 4, (1975), 29-148; *La Mémoire, L’Histoire, L’Oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000). (Memory, History, Forgetting, trans. K. Blamey and D. Pellauer Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Ricoeur and A. LaCocque, *Penser la Bible* (Paris: Seuil, 1998). (*Thinking Biblically, Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. D. Pellauer, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

21. Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, London: Routledge, 1991; *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed., (London: Routledge, 1997). Munslow, *Deconstructing*. P. Zagorin, ”History, the Referent, and Narrative Reflections on Postmodernism Now”, *History and Theory* 38, (1999), 1-24.

22. Following P. R. Davies and J. Rogerson, *The Old Testament World* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1989), 218. See also, G. J. Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics in Motion: An Analysis and Evaluation of Paul Ricoeur’s Contribution to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2002).

23. D. Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian, Writing the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. G. J. Laughery, K. McKinney and R. Bauckham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 5-7.
24. P. Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1971). Kellner, *Language*, 305-307, esp. 306, has a brief discussion of Veyne's work. He is appreciative of Veyne's position as 'it is couched in terms that are *moral* and *aesthetic*.' (*Italics his*).
25. See Ricoeur, *Temps*, I, 239-246 (*Time*, I, 169-174) for a critical interaction with this perspective.
26. We will be using the term historical discourse to refer to written accounts of the past. Our hope is that the different terminologies used will be clear enough for the reader to discern the meaning of the terms 'history,' 'historiography,' and 'historical discourse,' which all may refer to written accounts.
27. For further discussion see R. J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta, 1997); Jenkins, *Re-Thinking*; C. B. McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (London: Routledge, 1998).
28. See footnote 20 for the importance of interacting with Ricoeur on this question.
29. Ricoeur, "Philosophies", 140, views this enriching as the capacity of one level to bring greater clarity and precision to the other, while at the same time there remains epistemological problems that pertain to each level. Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 170, also stresses that the three-fold operation is not to be understood as a chronological succession.
30. G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971).
31. Ricoeur, "Philosophies", 154.
32. While it is true that there is also non-narrative historiography it is narrative historiography that has recently created the greater amount of discussion.
33. Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 169-170, 303-304.
34. *Ibid.*, 304, 340-369.
35. It is true that what interpreters have is the text, but the text has the capacity to point, beyond itself, to whom and what are behind it.
36. Ricoeur has stressed that the interpretation of a text is concerned with the world that unfolds in 'front' of the text, but this does not mean that he refuses an appropriate emphasis on a historical referent behind the text. See his discussions in, *From Text to Action* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 75-88; *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press), 1976; and "Esquisse de conclusion," in *Exégèse et herméneutique*, X, Léon Dufour, ed. (Paris: Seuil, 1971), 285-295. See also, Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), esp. 6-13.
37. D. W. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian View* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1979), 1-2, points out, "In the English language the word 'history' can mean either what people write about time gone by, that is historiography; or else it can mean what people have done and suffered, that is the historical process."
38. Ricoeur, "Philosophies", 159, 168-177. Ricoeur discusses these schools of thought, drawing out both the convergences and divergences in a useful manner.
39. White is correct to reject a naïve realism found in a positivist notion of historical discourse, but his reclassification seems to do away with the problematic of the referential dimension of such a literature. While it is true that some modernist ideas concerning history writing are defective: just the facts or neutral and entirely objective representation are surely in need of a credible critique, it is unnecessarily pessimistic to assume that knowledge of the past is solely a creation of the present or that narrative inevitably distorts real events in time beyond all reliable representation.
40. See A. P. Norman, "Telling it Like it Was", in *The History and Narrative Reader*, 181-196, esp., 191, who argues, "A good historian will interact dialogically with the historical record, recognizing the limits it places on possible construals of the past. Of course historians select their facts, and obviously the stories they tell are incomplete. But by itself this does not mean that the result is distorted or false."
41. White, *The Content*, 192-193, strongly argues that there is no narrative structure in life, prior to a literary construction. D. Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 11-12, 49-50, 59-60, esp. 49, maintains that White and other theorists treat structures, "as if they were imposed on meaningless data by the act of narration itself, as if the events of life, experiences and actions, had no structure in themselves and achieved it only at the hand of a literary invention." Carr challenges White's perspective, contending that life itself has inherent structures that are reflected in narrative.
42. Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 327-328 (*Italics his*).
43. White, *The Content*, 192-196 and "Historical", 15-33.
44. W. V. Harris, *Literary Meaning* (London: Macmillan, 1996), esp. 157-174, argues that if historical discourse is merely a narrative construction, fictionality reigns.
45. See the development of Ricoeur's notion of historical discourse above. For Ricoeur, the third level is the last in a sequence which depends on sources (trace, testimony, documents) and explanation and understanding.
46. Ricoeur, "Philosophies", 171-172.
47. Ricoeur's work in, *Time and Narrative*, is one major example of this contribution.

48. Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 223-226, views a vigilant epistemology as also guarding against a naïve realism, the notion that historical occurrence and historical discourse amount to the same thing.
49. Ricoeur, "Philosophies", 167-168. Also, Evans, *In Defence*, 73. See also, Bebbington, *Patterns*, 5, who writes that history is a science in that it is comparable to, 'Wissenschaft: the systematic quest for ordered knowledge' (*Italics his*).
50. Ricoeur, "Philosophies", 196. (parenthesis mine).
51. *Ibid.*, 196. See also, M. C. Lemon, *The Discipline of History and the History of Thought* (London: Routledge, 1995), 4-41, for a fecund discussion of history.
52. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, III, 142, points out, "Unlike novels, historians' constructions do aim at being reconstructions of the past ... historians are subject to what once was."
53. See G. Steiner, *Real Presences* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), 89-97, who writes of a "semantic trust" without which there would be no history as we know it - a trust between word and world - a necessary covenant between word and object that calls us to respond. He argues for "real presence" versus "real absence."
54. Ricoeur, "Can Fictional Narratives be True", *Analecta Husserliana* XIV (1983), 3-19, esp. 4-7.
55. Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics*, 105-128.
56. Laughery, "Language at the Frontiers of Language", in: *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, C. G. Bartholomew, C. J. D. Greene, K. Möller, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 171-194. S. D. Moore, "The Post Age," Stamp", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LVIII/3 (1989), 543-559; *Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, G. Ward, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); A. C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); K. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), are all examples of an awareness of the influence of postmodernism in these fields.
57. For further discussion on this issue, see J. D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1973); *The Power of Parable: How Fiction by Jesus became Fiction about Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2012). S. McFague, *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). Laughery interacts with Crossan's previous work on parables in: *Living Reflections: Theology, Philosophy, and Hermeneutics* (Huémoz: Destinée, 2010), 127-147; and in *Living Hermeneutics*, 79-105.
58. The notion of 'subjectively objective knowledge' underscores the perspective that the knower (subject) is always involved in the knowing (object). Our wager, therefore, is that there is no such thing as solely subjective or objective knowledge. When it comes to knowing, both are necessary and neither dimension effaces the other. This means that knowledge is a tensional and interactively dynamic affair. See Laughery, "Evangelicalism and Philosophy", in: *The Futures of Evangelicalism: Issues and Prospects*, C. G. Bartholomew, R. Parry, and A. West, eds. (Leicester: IVP, 2003; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 246-270.
59. R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 15, remarks that a more marked interest in a literary perspective of the Bible begins to arise in the 1970s. See also, H. Blocher, "Biblical Narrative and Historical Reference," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 3, (1989), 102-122.
60. Alter, *Art*, 1981, 34, 41 uses these terms without a great deal of clarity or identification as to whether they are the same or different modes of narrating. See V. P. Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 59-62, for an insightful perspective and clarification of terminology. Also, M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 1-57.
61. See Long's excellent discussion in *Art*, 58-87 of these two views. Long's own position can be summarized in the following manner. The word fiction may be understood in two senses. Fiction is a literary genre and fiction is artistry, creativity, skill. The former may be in conflict with historiography, while the latter need not be. If these two senses are kept in mind, it may be possible to continue to speak of fiction and history as opposites, while at the same time acknowledging that all historiography is fictionalized, while recognizing nevertheless that this does not negate the intent to recount historical occurrences in the real world.
62. See, Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); J. Fodor, *Christian Hermeneutics. Paul Ricoeur and the Refiguring of Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); D. R. Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2001), and Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics*, for recent evaluations of Ricoeur's work.
63. Ricoeur, "Philosophical Hermeneutics and Biblical Hermeneutics", in: *From Text to Action*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 89-101. Stiver, *Theology*, 123-136, esp., 124 and "Ricoeur, Speech-Act Theory, and the Gospels as History", in *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation*, 50-72, argues that Ricoeur's position is "much more historical than some believe," while including the caveat that he is emphasizing that Ricoeur's philosophical views allow for diverse theological appropriations.
64. Ricoeur and LaCocque, *Thinking Biblically*, ix-xix.
65. Ricoeur, "Naming God", in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, M. I. Wallace, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 217-235 and "Herméneutique. Les finalités de l'exégèse biblique", in *La Bible en philosophie, Approches contemporaines* (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 27-51, esp. 35.
66. See Long, *Art* and "Historiography of the Old Testament", in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, D. W. Baker and B. T. Arnold, eds. (Leicester: IVP, 1999), 145-175, who has

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insightful suggestions on the importance of genre and the various methods of investigating the first Testament. Also, T. Longman, "Storytellers and Poets in the Bible: Can Literary Artifice Be True?", in: *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic*, H. Conn, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 137-150.

67. Ricoeur, "Naming", 217-235, esp., 224.

68. *Ibid.*, 225.

69. Ricoeur, *La Mémoire*, 457-480, shows the devastating results of the metanarrative of death. He argues that for Heidegger the future is under the sign of *being towards death*, and as such the indefinite time of nature and history are subsumed to mortal finitude. In contrast, Ricoeur contends that death is an interruption and proposes *being towards life* as the desire to be (to live) and the power to act, which gives the historian a remembering voice in time. See also, 604-656, where Ricoeur has a detailed discussion of the notions of love, pardon, memory, and gift frequently connected to the two Testaments.

70. Ricoeur, "Reply to L. S. Mudge", in: *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, L. S. Mudge, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 43-44. At this juncture, 1979-1980, Ricoeur is wrestling with the question of whether testimony can preserve the connection between sense and referent. It would appear, from his more recent work in *La Mémoire* and "Philosophies", the response would be yes. See also Vanhoozer, *Biblical*, 140-141 and 275-289; Fodor, *Christian*, 226-289; Stiver, *Theology*, 123-124 and 188-250; Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics*, 105-148 and 151-162 for a more extensive development of this question.

71. Ricoeur, "Towards a Hermeneutic", *Essays*, 134-135. Confession is central to testimony, but this is not merely a confession of faith, but also of meaning. For Ricoeur, there is a dynamic interaction of meaning and fact and confession and narration.

72. See Ricoeur, "Philosophical", in: *From Text*, 89-101. There is a coherence here on the level of general and biblical hermeneutics in that both affirm there is a behind or outside the text that must be taken into consideration in its interpretation. For a discussion of Ricoeur's views of the relation between philosophical (general) and biblical (special) hermeneutics, see Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics*, 43-55, and "Language", above.

73. Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic", *Essays*, 73-118, esp., 79.

74. Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics", 135-139.

75. Ricoeur, "Le récit interprétative. Exégèse et théologie dans les récits de la Passion", *Recherches de science religieuse* 73 (1985), 17-38, esp. 20-21; "Herméneutique", 27-51 and "From Proclamation to Narrative", *Journal of Religion* LXIV (1984), 501-512.

76. Laughery, *Living Hermeneutics*, 131-148. Stiver, *Theology*, 196-219. See also, Vanhoozer, *Biblical*, 282, while not always sharing the view that Ricoeur does enough to distinguish history and fiction states: "Indeed, I have already suggested that Ricoeur's own prescriptions for mediating history and fiction and preserving the realism of the event are a sufficient cure for the occasional lapses in hermeneutic equilibrium."