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Figuring and Refiguring the Female Self: Towards a Feminist Hermeneutic

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Hermeneutics is concerned with the interpretation of texts, and with the process of self-transformation and self-identity[1] through such interpretation. It is concerned with past, present and future relations among readers, authors, texts, communities and worlds. In a word, it is concerned with *understanding*. Asking the question "What does it mean to be human?", hermeneutics articulates a theory of understanding. While hermeneutics claims to answer this question for all humanity, to be universal, this is in fact a false claim, for the tradition as it has developed in Continental philosophy from Schleiermacher to Ricoeur, is both gender-blind and gender-biased. It is, unsurprisingly, androcentric.

Despite this androcentrism, however, the tradition of hermeneutics is, I suggest, highly relevant for feminist theory. Focusing on self, text and world, this tradition, particularly in its postmodern forms,[2] actually creates room for female readers, authors and communities. While the tradition has, to date, created this space blindly and indirectly, the space is there waiting to be occupied. So I am interested in naming and extending this female space which means exploring gender questions in the context of hermeneutics and hermeneutics in the context of gender

theory. From such an exploration will develop both a feminist hermeneutic or a theory of human understanding that takes gender into account, and a hermeneutic feminism or a theory of gender that is informed by hermeneutics. Such an exploration will further our understanding of how patriarchal structures have arisen and been maintained and how they can be changed.

I begin by raising gender-related questions in the context of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and hermeneutical questions in the context of certain biblical scholars, such as Phyllis Trible and especially Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza. While Ricoeur's hermeneutic lacks any discussion of gender, it is, as I will show, congenial to the raising of gender-related questions, and while feminist biblical scholarship lacks extended discussion of hermeneutical questions, these remain implicit and central to this scholarship. To begin with this latter claim, I reflect briefly on Trible and Schüssler Fiorenza.

Feminist Biblical Scholarship and Hermeneutics

An examination of the hermeneutical method of Trible and Schüssler Fiorenza shows that their work focuses on the *object* of interpretation which for them is the biblical text and, in the case of Schüssler Fiorenza, the communities of women and men who produced this text. Neither scholar explores the relation between text and (female) self-identity, such a hermeneutical concern remaining the presupposition and end of their work rather than its focus. So Trible's work consists almost entirely of detailed analyses of specific biblical texts (1978 and 1984). By means of these analyses, by "participating in the movement of the text" (1978:4), Trible arrives at their meaning, for in her view, "proper analysis of form yields proper articulation of content" (1978:8). Trible's literary-critical method requires an extreme respect for the text, since it is the text itself which provides the principal clue for how it is to be interpreted. Her close attention to textual detail is witness to the fidelity with which she follows this internal clue. Alongside this clue, Trible speaks of a second hermeneutical clue, that between the text and the world (1978:5-8). By this she means the way the text relates to contemporary concerns and world views, as examples of which she cites Black struggles, Marxist and American ideologies, psychology, ecology, sexuality, and feminism. This last, which she defines as the "critique of culture in the light of misogyny" (1978:7), is her chosen world view providing the perspective from which she interprets the biblical text. But Trible simply affirms and does not discuss this text-world connection. She does not, for example, discuss the relations between gendered texts *and* gendered readers and authors, past and present, nor the role of gender in human under-

standing. In Trible's work the concept of gender functions not as a question but as a given with her feminist perspective simply guiding the choice of texts to be interpreted. Her work presumes that providing feminist interpretations of certain biblical texts, those that have female imagery for God and those that pay attention to women as either agents or victims, is good for contemporary women. I do not necessarily disagree with this presumption, but I am suggesting we need to think it through.

The work of Schüssler Fiorenza also, in my view, presupposes and does not think through the connections between gendered biblical text and gendered world. Like Trible's, her work is largely text-centred. This may seem a surprising claim, for in the lengthy theoretical section at the beginning of *In Memory of Her* (1983), when discussing her own hermeneutical method, Schüssler Fiorenza explicitly states that her aim is to move beyond androcentric biblical text to socio-historical context. In fact she is critical of Trible's work precisely because of its concentration on the text to the neglect of the historical context (1983:19-21). By contrast, Schüssler Fiorenza's stated focus is not the text but the context that gave rise to it, the ancient communities that she reconstructs in such a way that women as well as men are at their centre. She also states that such a move from text to context has political implications in that it can help change present social realities in Christian churches. In other words, Schüssler Fiorenza is, on her own account, more interested in the context, ancient and contemporary, than in the text, for it is in the former and not the latter that revelation is to be found, a proposition she states in many places. She begins chapter two of *In Memory of Her*, for example, by suggesting that the "locus of revelation is not the androcentric text but the life and ministry of Jesus and the movement of women and men called forth by him" (41).[3] Since revelation finds its place in the life of the community and not in a text, she sees it as essential to move from text to context.

It seems to me, though, that Schüssler Fiorenza has here overstated her case, and that in practice she does not move beyond the text but rather moves constantly between text *and* a constructed historical context. Her work, like Trible's, attends to the detail of certain ancient texts which are always read in the context of the needs of contemporary women. Her work differs from Trible's, however, in that it attempts to reconstruct the ancient communities which gave rise to these texts. Her method is historical-theological and not literary-critical. This method does not require that her work move *beyond* the text, but rather that it situate itself at the intersection of text and context which is precisely where her work is located. The focus of her work is specific texts, and the presupposition and end of her work are the ancient communities

that created these texts and the present communities that interpret them. The problem with Schüssler Fiorenza's stated aim is that it tends to reify the past, to speak as though an historical context which she has constructed once existed and still exists as a place to which we can refer. Such a stated aim does not sufficiently recognise the place of both text and present context in the construction of any community of the past. In the present instance Schüssler Fiorenza moves between a reading of ancient androcentric texts both canonical and non-canonical *and* her reading of the contemporary needs of women, the first reading being explicit and the second more implicit. This is a far more complex interaction than simply moving from androcentric text to socio-historical context.

It may seem niggardly to point out what the work of Trible and Schüssler Fiorenza does not achieve, when, as literary-critic and theologian-historian respectively, their work already contributes so much, and the designated omissions are after all the concerns of a philosopher. My purpose in discussing their omissions is, however, the constructive one of defining an area that needs exploration, that of feminist hermeneutics or hermeneutic feminism. *Implicit* in the work of these feminist biblical scholars are many of the concerns of hermeneutics: what is the nature of human understanding and self-identity, what is the place of text interpretation, how do text and self support and/or undermine each other? And *explicit* in their work is what hermeneutics has omitted: an awareness of gendered humanity. So I intend to mine a gender-blind and gender-biased hermeneutical tradition for clues about the formation of the female self. Specifically, I intend to mine Ricoeur's hermeneutics in order to make explicit some of the connections between text and female self-identity, connections which are the presupposition and end of feminist biblical scholarship, but not its focus.

Hermeneutics and Gender

Ricoeur's output on the topic of hermeneutics is vast and here I concentrate on his three-volume *Time and Narrative* (1984) and on the concept of *mimesis* central to this work. The thesis of *Time and Narrative* can be simply stated: time becomes human to the extent it is made narrative and narrative is meaningful to the extent it portrays human temporality (52). Human time and human narrative are interdependent. In support of this thesis, Ricoeur brings into conversation Augustine and Aristotle, specifically the Augustine of Book XI of the *Confessions* reflecting on time and the Aristotle of the *Poetics* writing on plot. The conversation takes the form of a Ricoeurian "mediating construction" (52), which by degrees builds the relation between the flux and discordance of human time *and* the enduring stability of poetic composition.

Augustine defines the problem of time: "how can time exist if the past is no longer, if the future is not yet, and if the present is not always?" (7). Ricoeur accepts Augustine's own response: "by entrusting to memory the fate of things past, and to expectation that of things to come, we can include memory and expectation in an extended and dialectical present" (11). And he applauds Augustine's famous formula: "it might be correct to say that there are three times, a present of past things, a present of present things, a present of future things. Some such different times do exist in the mind, but nowhere else that I can see" (11).

So a span of time exists in the mind, in the distension of the soul ("*distentio animi*"), which alone seems capable of embracing the dialectic of the three-fold present. But Augustine's solution takes the form of a lament. Deprived of the stillness of eternity which it desires, the soul is torn in order to embrace the dialectical present. Emphasising the negative aspects of time, Augustine's reflection displays the human experience of discordance. While concurring with this response, Ricoeur wants to think further the problem of time. So he turns to Aristotle, not for his concept of time but for his work on plot.

Seeking a concordance that will heal the discordance of time, at least in some measure, Ricoeur turns to the related Aristotelian concepts of *muthos* and *mimesis*. He understands *muthos* or plot as an "integrative process" that orders and synthesises the incongruent and the dissimilar (1986:122). By selecting a beginning, a middle and an end, emplotment creates a configuration out of a succession of happenings. This creation of order, this weaving of different incidents into a single, followable story begins to heal the human experience of fragmentation and flux, the experience of time. Ricoeur's analysis of plot is supplemented by a more detailed analysis of the Aristotelian concept of *mimesis* translated as "creative imitation" (1984:45), or *mimesis praxeos* as "creative imitating of the practical field" (1989:88). Ricoeur detects three moments in this Aristotelian concept which he designates as mimesis 1, mimesis 2 and mimesis 3, being respectively the activities of prefiguring, configuring and refiguring a narrative.

For Ricoeur, mimesis 1 is the moment of prefiguring on which depends all narrative configurations, all plotting of stories, be they works of fiction or history (1984:54-64). Prefiguring encompasses meaningful actions and examples of rule-bound behaviours which arise from specific norms and values. These actions and behaviours have certain structural, symbolic and temporal features, that is, a certain narrative quality which we can understand. The same practical intelligence which provides this understanding of everyday actions also operates in our configuring and refiguring of narrative. We can understand the charac-

ters, goals, motives, and especially the plot of narrative because of a certain pre-understanding of action gleaned from life. We can follow a story because our own lives are stories, because "life" itself is "a story in search of a narrator". Prefiguring is the potentiality within life to be turned into narrative, and the potentiality within ourselves to follow such a narrative. This preliminary narrative competence, gained initially from the acting and suffering we call life, is what Ricoeur designates as mimesis 1.

When Ricoeur speaks of this human ability to follow a story, we can assume he means that both men and women possess this competence, drawn as it is from everyday life. We can assume that since both men and women are engaged in meaningful action both have the ability to configure and refigure texts, or at least neither is precluded from having this competence by virtue of being male or female. For both men and women, life is a story in search of a narrator. Why then have women not configured their own stories? Or, more precisely, why have women not configured written narratives which have survived as classic texts in the way the Bible has survived? Given that women are equally involved in mimesis 1, why are women not as involved as men in the configuring activity of mimesis 2? And if we are as involved, why is this not widely acknowledged? Is it that men and women acquire different kinds of narrative competence? Do our configurations take different forms? Why the discrepancy between women's obvious involvement in human time (mimesis 1) and women's apparent lack of involvement or restricted involvement in narrative (mimesis 2), between women's living and configuring? And why have women-as-a-group not refigured the patriarchal plot of classic Western narratives? Why have we been so slow to read the unequal construction of men and women's time as the "master" plot in Western narrative? Such questions arise once the concept of gender is considered in the context of Ricoeur's mimesis 1.

Ricoeur's mimesis 2 refers to the dynamic activity of configuring a narrative plot whereby the "dissimilar" and "incongruent" are woven into a "synthesis" (1986:123). By means of this activity a multiplicity of incidents becomes a single story, and discordance gives way to concordance as the flux of time experienced in successive unrelated events is transformed into an enduring followable configuration. Emplotment is a unifying and sustaining activity. Emerging from the moment of prefiguration designated as mimesis 1, it has its roots in everyday life, and re-merging into the moment of refiguration designated as mimesis 3, it reconnects with life in the dynamic activity of appropriating a text. In defining mimesis 2, Ricoeur has isolated the mediating moment when the narrative touches life on either side of it, the moment when the nar-

rative has already emerged from life and has not yet re-merged with it. Mimesis 2 represents the core of Ricoeur's thesis, that the narrative plot transforms time into human time thus creating identity. In fact, the only possibility for a community or individual to have identity is via narrative because it alone can configure temporality.

In the context of this concept of emplotment, several gender-related questions can be raised under the headings of *what* is configured and *who* does the configuring?[4] Ricoeur actually addresses the former question in his own analysis and although he does not include a consideration of gender, his analysis is still useful.

So *what* is configured? Time is configured, says Ricoeur. But whose time? By and large, it is the time of men, of great men, of men in public office, and not the time of insignificant men, of women or of children. By and large, narratives relate the stories of victors and not those of conquered peoples. And why do most narratives, at least most considered classical, configure the time of great men? One reason is that the scientific ambition of history always prefers to configure works from documents, monuments and archives. Seeking absolute certainty and believing it can capture the past as it really was, scientific history prefers these types of publicly validated evidence, these traces of "real agents" (1984:182). This means that those whose actions are not recorded in documents, monuments or archives do not, typically, have their time configured in the narratives of scientific history. Such people are women, children, and men who are poor and/or illiterate. So when Ricoeur traces the thread from scientific history, through narrative to "real agents", the "real agents" are predominantly men. They are not women or children or illiterate men even though these too are "real people" in that they all participate in life (mimesis 1), and they all configure their own time in any number of ways (mimesis 2) leaving traces of their lives. But these traces are of no interest to the ambitions of scientific history. Lacking historians who will configure them further, the traces of the insignificant themselves become insignificant.

Ricoeur is critical of scientific history for its forgetfulness of the past, a forgetfulness promoted by the Enlightenment ideals of progress and certainty (1988:214-5).[5] Historians, he says, have a "debt to the past, a debt of recognition to the dead" that they can never adequately repay. They will always remain "insolvent debtors" (1988:143). This debt is particularly large in the case of defeated peoples, those "victims whose suffering cries less for vengeance than for narration" (1988:189). Ricoeur has in mind victims of horrific deeds, such as victims of the Holocaust who are "par excellence the representatives in our memory of all history's victims" (1988:187). He sees the horror aroused by their story as the

inversion of the veneration evoked by stories of victories of the great. These negative epics must be told, he says, for their memory alone can prevent the recurrence of such crimes.

While I agree with Ricoeur on the need for negative epics, my questions about gender are not concerned especially with the victims of horrific deeds who are, or deserve to be, the subject of negative epics. My questions are concerned primarily with the victims of accepted structures, those who are not deemed worthy subjects of any epics at all, positive or negative. Women-as-a-group fall into this category. The accepted structures of the narrative tradition preclude women from being the subject of epics in any way comparable with men. Within this tradition women's experience of temporality remains largely unconfigured except in so far as it has bearing on the experience of significant men. In classical *historical* narratives women are plotted (if they are plotted at all) as subordinate characters in androcentric stories. And in classical *fictional* narratives, when women are plotted as subjects, they are consistently idealised or denigrated. On both counts the temporal experience of women *as self-identified*[6] people has not been configured into enduring poetic compositions.

Another observation entailing a gender distinction can safely be made. When we ask *who* configures narrative, fictional and historical, the short and trivial answer is men and women. But when we ask who configures those narratives considered classics and those influential in the public arena, then the answer is mainly men. Women do, of course, configure narratives, but it is by and large men who configure narratives considered significant. A brief survey of the classics in any field will verify this. So most classic narratives, whether they are structuring men's time as in written history, or men and women's time (albeit unequally) as in fiction, are authored by men, that is they arise out of the imagination of men. The pre-narrative source of most classic narratives are the "opaque depths" of men's, and not women's, "living, acting and suffering" (1984:53). This is not to say that male authors write only of what they have personally experienced, for they can obviously write of women's experience and of other types of experience they could not possibly have had. My point is that their writing is always the product of a male imagination (even when writing of women's experience) and it is often inappropriately androcentric.

Mimesis 3 is, for Ricoeur, the vital moment marking the intersection between the world of the text *and* the world of the listener or reader (1988:159). This is the moment of catharsis, pleasure and purgation (1984:50) when the configured narrative returns to the time of action and suffering (1984:70), to refigured time. This passage from configura-

tion to refiguration, from the fictive world of the text to the real and potential world of the reader, is mediated by the dynamic activity of reading. Ricoeur surveys a number of theories of reading beginning with those closest to the pole of the author and moving to those more concerned with the reader (1988: 160-179). These theories are a particularly fertile ground for the raising of gender questions.

Ricoeur begins his survey with a discussion of the rhetoric of persuasion used by the author, a rhetoric which takes the form of various strategies ranging from the author's omniscience to his or her effacement. Such strategies betray the presence of the "implied author" who, unlike the real author, can always be detected in the text. Sometimes, though, this detection is difficult because of the cunning with which the author's strategies are concealed. From this perspective, the reader, or rather the "implied reader", is seen as a victim of the author's cunningly concealed strategies, a figure wholly constructed by the work. Such a reader can do nothing but follow the prescriptions for reading inscribed in the text. This kind of theory with its emphasis on the strategies of the implied author and the victimisation of the reader, draws attention to the activity of the text and underplays that of the reader. Not surprisingly, Ricoeur's survey moves on to those theories which see the reader as more actively engaged.

Theories that start from the reader provide support for Ricoeur's concept of the reader as mediator between configuration and refiguration: a text requires a reader because he or she brings the work of emplotment to completion (1988:159). And some texts demand more of the reader than others. Some modern novels, for example, on account of their incompleteness and the unreliability of their narrators, leave much of the configuring task to the reader. As Ricoeur quaintly says, "the lack of readability fabricated by the author" sometimes means that "reading ... becomes a picnic where the author brings the words and the reader the meaning" (1988:169). This "lack of determinacy" means that it is left to the reader to configure the work. A reader can also encounter an "excess of meaning" in which case the inexhaustibility of the text gives rise to an almost infinite number of readings. Both a lack of readability and an excess of meaning make large demands on the reader. Having to be actively involved in configuring the work, the reader is far from the passive victim envisaged by rhetorical theories of reading.

So, in Ricoeur's view, the reader is in a tensive relation with the work, being both constrained and free, constrained by its rhetoric of persuasion *and* free to configure it in almost infinite ways. For Ricoeur, the right distance from the work occurs when the reader finds the illusions of the work at the one time "irresistible and untenable" (1988:169). He

wants to hold in tension those rhetorical theories of reading which emphasise the strategies of the implied author which render the work irresistible *and* the hermeneutical theories which concentrate on the reader in whom is vested the supreme authority to interpret the work and to find its illusions untenable (1988:166). Without denying the significance of the rhetorical theories, Ricoeur finds the hermeneutical theories less reductive. His comment on the difference between the implied author and the implied reader makes this clear. He says, "whereas the real author effaces himself in the implied author, the implied reader takes on substance in the real reader" (1988:170). This real reader constitutes the horizon of Ricoeur's work. As he says, "the phenomenology of the act of reading requires a flesh and blood reader, who, in actualising the role of the reader prestructured in and through the text, transforms it" (1988:171). Here we can detect the tensive yes and no of Ricoeur's position: yes, the reader is prestructured by the text, and no, the reader is not wholly prestructured, for he or she can transform the text. This interest in the transforming role of the "flesh and blood reader" and its relation to the way the text prestructures this same reader renders Ricoeur's work particularly suitable for raising questions related to gender.

So what is this prestructured or implied reader like? Does this reader have a sex, race or class? What is the connection between the implied reader and the real reader? Leaving aside the significant questions of race and class, I think the implied reader as structured in most classic works does most certainly have a sex and that is male. If this is the case, it means that women are usually reading over the shoulders of their male counterparts to whom the works are really addressed.[7] It means there are several destructive consequences for women and also for men, particularly when considered in the context of rhetorical theories of reading.

Ricoeur says that emplotment is the joint work of text and reader (1984:76; 1988:159), and he wants to acknowledge the contribution of both in the mimetic moment of refiguration. Rhetorical theories, by contrast, put emphasis on the work of the text and largely ignore the work of the reader. According to these theories, the text configures and refigures the reader rather than the other way round, in which case patriarchal texts construct women as implied readers who are male, or they construct them as female only when dealing with topics designated as feminine. This means that when women read narratives addressed to men, historical narratives where women are rarely active subjects, or fictional narratives where women are idealised or belittled, they are victims of a pervasive strategy which denies or denigrates their existence as flesh and blood people. It means that women, applying these texts to their lives, contribute to their own destruction as women.

Reading is the moment of catharsis, pleasure and purgation, says Ricoeur following Aristotle (1984:50). Reading gives pleasure vicariously. But is this equally the case for women and men? Does it make any difference whether the real reader is a woman or a man? I think it does. Women readers, unlike men, usually pay a price for the pleasure of catharsis. We have two options. We can identify with the idealised or denigrated female figures of classic fiction, in which case we maintain the status quo and reinforce a hierarchic symbolic and political structure. Or, we can identify with powerful males who are the subject of most historical and some fictional works. In this case, the pleasure for women readers is experienced at some cost to our own flesh and blood selves. So a female reader, in order to experience cathartic pleasure and purgation, must allow herself to be structured by the work, she must become the implied reader who is a willing, or perhaps unconscious, victim of the strategies of the implied male author. She becomes, in other words, an honorary male, submissive to strategies that exclude or subordinate women (and some other groups). So patriarchal works with their patriarchal implied authors give rise to patriarchal readers, implied and real, who in turn will configure their own patriarchal works. Such is the vicious circle of the Western narrative tradition.

Mimesis 3, then, designates the moment when the configured narrative returns to the time of action and suffering (1984:70), but it is, I suggest, principally the action of men and the suffering of women. Stated in the terms of Ricoeur's thesis, male readers of classic texts experience the healing power of action, a sign of the concordance of the narrative tradition, while female readers experience the enervating fate of suffering, a sign of the discordance of time. In other words, the cathartic experience frequently splits along gender lines. Consider this proposition of Ricoeur's: "it is beyond reading, in effective action, instructed by the works handed down, that the configuration of the text is transformed into refiguration" (1988:159). Configuration comes to completion in refiguration when reading is translated into effective action. Here is the link between reading and ontology, between "seeing as" and "being as". This "being" is the fullness of the third mimetic moment and the horizon of all Ricoeur's work. But given the way women and men are "instructed by the works handed down", by works that are generally patriarchal, what kind of "being" do women, and indeed men, receive? Is it not a patriarchal being?

This grim picture of a vicious circle emerges when gender questions are raised in the context of rhetorical theories of reading. Fortunately, hermeneutical theories hold some hope for breaking the circle, or rather for transforming its viciousness. These theories, with their emphasis on

the activity of reading, account for ways in which the reader can handle texts destructive of flesh and blood selves. What the reader can do is respond to the strategies of the author by partly configuring the work, for he or she is not only constrained by the text as rhetorical theories claim, but is also free to complete it in a variety of ways. And the more incomplete the text, the more it lacks determinacy, the more scope for the reader to configure and refigure. So women readers can resist the temptation to construct themselves as honorary male readers, or as secondary female readers in a patriarchal scheme. They can, to some degree, refigure the text against its own intention.

So a work remains open in respect of its refiguration even though its configuration is, in a certain sense, closed. A patriarchal text will eternally configure a patriarchal implied reader, but a real reader, finding the patriarchal illusion untenable, can open the text and refigure it differently. As Ricoeur says, "a well-closed fiction opens an abyss in our world, that is, in our symbolic apprehension of the world" (1985:21). Many feminist readers are currently exploring the abyss, apprehending the symbolics of a patriarchal world in ways that that world never intended.[8] These readers are refiguring classic patriarchal texts and configuring new texts in which women can recognise themselves as women. To adapt Proust's comment (quoted by Ricoeur) about his own relationship with his readers, these feminist authors are furnishing women with the means of reading what lies inside themselves in a way that the Western narrative tradition has largely failed to do (1985:150).[9]

It should not be deduced from this that a patriarchal tradition presents no problems for women and that we can refigure works as we please. The Western tradition does indeed present a problem because, despite the freedom and openness of the reading community to refigure a work, it is always constrained by the closed nature of the work itself. Readers *are* constrained by the text, that is by the tradition in which our experience is sedimented and which constructs us, men and women, in certain ways. Ricoeur says we are born into a tradition, that it gives birth to us before we give birth to it. Works always precede and give rise to the community and not the other way round.[10] But the community also makes its contribution by refiguring old works and bringing about the configuration of the new.

It is precisely this appreciation of a reciprocal work that renders Ricoeur's thinking valuable for an analysis of gender. This thinking keeps in tension both the work of texts in constructing and deconstructing the reading community *and* the work of the reading community in deconstructing and reconstructing texts.[11] At the one time it resists those theories which see the tradition as having total power to construct the

community *and* those that distance the community from the tradition, as though the former were alien to the latter and did not depend on it for its very existence. In terms of the first schema, a feminist analysis would see women as seduced by a patriarchal tradition and powerless to change it, and in terms of the second we would be seen as absolutely free of the tradition, in which case it would be seen as in no way responsible for women's current condition of subordination, which is patently false. Beyond these alternatives of total conformity to a tradition and an alienating distance from it, Ricoeur detects an analogising relation between community and texts, one which can hold Sameness and Otherness in tension (1988:178). This tensive Ricoeurian thinking can serve to explicate how a patriarchal tradition has perpetuated itself and how that tradition is now changing as feminist readers and writers slowly transform the viciousness of the circle of patriarchal text and patriarchal community.

Towards a Feminist Hermeneutic

It is instructive to consider Schüssler Fiorenza's work in the context of Ricoeur's three mimetic moments, to consider how the moments of prefiguring, configuring and refiguring appear in her women-centred work.[12] But where best to enter the mimetic circle? Although Ricoeur discusses mimesis 1, 2 and 3 in that order, his work actually proceeds in the reverse order, from refiguration to prefiguration, for he begins with a refiguration of Augustine and Aristotle. Similarly, Schüssler Fiorenza begins not with her own life experience but with the biblical text and certain contemporary feminist texts. Ricoeur may say that life is "a story in search of a narrator" and no doubt Schüssler Fiorenza would agree, women's lives being largely untold stories of female victimisation and self-actualisation. But both Ricoeur and Schüssler Fiorenza begin not with their lives but with the stories we have inherited, the classic stories of the tradition. Both move, not from life to narrative, but from narrative to life, from text to context. This direction appears to be contrary to the feminist principle of always beginning with one's own experience but, taking my cue from Schüssler Fiorenza and Ricoeur, I will proceed in the same direction. In life, of course, we need not make such a choice as the three mimetic moments are often simultaneous and indistinguishable, but here a choice must be made for the sake of configuring a coherent work.

So I begin with the narrative, with seeing the text as a story in search of a reader, and seeing the androcentric text as a story in search of a *male* reader or at least an androcentric reader, for this is the way the reader is prestructured in such a text. What happens when an androcentric text

finds a *female* reader or a gynocentric reader? There is, then, a misfit between the femaleness of the flesh-and-blood reader and the maleness of the reader structured within the text which means that the real reader must, if she is faithful to herself, refigure the text against its own intention, at least in respect of gender. Any woman reader who understands herself as identified with other women in femaleness and as different from men in their maleness must reject the strategies of an androcentric text which constructs her as an implied reader who is honorary male or subordinate female. She must read the text at one remove finding its illusion of normative maleness untenable. It seems to me that this is how Schüssler Fiorenza has refigured the androcentric biblical text. She has read the text against its own patriarchal intention. The evidence for this is in the women-centredness of her own configured work, a work which is actually constructed from her refiguration of biblical and other texts. This is the hermeneutical circle. By means of refiguration, sometimes called a hermeneutics of suspicion and consent, works are configured which can in turn engender the reflexive self, and women-centred works can engender the reflexive female self.

Schüssler Fiorenza configures her own women-centred work from her refiguration of the androcentric biblical text. How does she do this? She does it by refiguring the biblical narrative and configuring her own narrative in such a way that women as well as men are at the centre. She presumes that women are and always have been agents of history, that women participate equally with men in everyday life, in the moment Ricoeur designates as mimesis 1. She presumes that women, like men, were part of the origins of Christianity. This presupposition is apparent in her critique of androcentric translations and interpretations. She says, for example, "any interpretation and translation claiming to be historically adequate to the language character of its sources must understand and translate New Testament androcentric language on the whole as inclusive of women until proven otherwise" (1983:45). Her point is that New Testament language, like the language of today, is generally androcentric, but we cannot assume from this that women were absent or insignificant. On the contrary, we must assume that women were there and were significant. Women were not written into this history, except in subordinate roles, so now she refigures and configures the narrative of the Jesus movement and of early Christianity in such a way that women are no longer confined to subordinate roles but are at the centre of the narrative both as active participants and as sufferers under the excluding structures of patriarchy. Her presupposition is that women were there and are here, that we were and are part of the historical con-

text despite the exclusion and diminished roles allotted to women in the biblical narrative.

How well founded is Schüssler Fiorenza's presupposition? What provides the foundation for her own women-centred configuration? It is actually based on the connections between her reading of certain women-centred texts *and* her own experience. Schüssler Fiorenza is able to say that women were present as leaders at the beginnings of Christianity because of evidence provided not only in the Bible itself but also in certain non-canonical texts which were written at about the same time as the New Testament and whose meanings frequently contradict or challenge those of canonical texts. By bringing into collision the meanings of canonical and non-canonical texts, Schüssler Fiorenza brings into question the patriarchal means by which some texts were selected to constitute the Bible and others, particularly those suggesting the leadership of women, were excluded (1983:48ff). To explore the collision of meanings within and between canonical and non-canonical texts is an exercise in suspicion. It is the means by which Schüssler Fiorenza constructs the particular historical communities which produced these texts. And this exercise is not confined to interpreting ancient texts, for woven through her reconstruction are references to modern texts, particularly feminist texts. So out of this conflict of interpretations within and between ancient and modern texts, Schüssler Fiorenza configures her own women-centred work. She moves, in Ricoeur's terms, from refiguration to configuration, from mimesis 3 to mimesis 2.

How is this move related to Schüssler Fiorenza's own life experience, to the "opaque depths of living and suffering" that Ricoeur names mimesis 1? We cannot, of course, say exactly how her refiguring and configuring are related to her own life because as readers of her work we do not have access to the author herself, but only to the implied author who is configured in the work. This is not to say the connections between text and flesh-and-blood author are not there, but only that they are inaccessible to the reader, (and often to the author herself). Still, some comments can be made. We can deduce that Schüssler Fiorenza is able to follow the thread of androcentrism or gynocentrism in various texts, able to read the gender plot of the narrative, because of her own life experience. We can note that she brings a range of texts into collision not only with each other but also with the meaning of contemporary women's lives. The textual evidence for this is in her *choice* of texts and in her *attention* to the concept of gender. She selects texts that give rise to gynocentric meanings or meanings of mutuality between women and men and brings them into collision with the androcentric biblical text.

Her selection is gynocentric, an unusual selection in an androcentric and patriarchal world which does not count such texts as classics. And she attends to gender, to the ways men and women are constructed in the text. Moving between androcentric and gynocentric meanings, between a hermeneutics of suspicion and consent, she finds the illusions of various texts both untenable and irresistible. In her work is the tensive "yes and no" we noted in Ricoeur's. So she refigures and configures the narratives from the point of view of the contemporary self-identified woman who, it could be said, is the implied author of her work. Implicitly, this author is asking what does it mean to be human female. And the response takes the form of an historical and theological reconstruction of self-identified women, that is of women who find their identity in their relation to themselves, to the divine and to each other, and in their difference from men, women who practise relations of mutuality with self and other.

So Schüssler Fiorenza articulates the time of women in three mimetic moments, not of women subordinate to men but of women living for themselves. To restate Ricoeur's thesis from a woman's perspective: Schüssler Fiorenza's work indicates the way towards a certain female identity and thus heals in some degree women's experience of the discordance of time. In configuring the past of self-identified women and anticipating our future she provides a memory and an expectation that contemporary women can now live in a dialectical present. She provides for women a discordant concordance. Such a work is the product of a women-centred imagination and belongs to a feminist tradition. In this tradition the patriarchal meaning of classical narratives is transformed into one of mutuality thereby disclosing possibilities of non-hierarchical being and acting for the female (and male) self. How does this feminist tradition arise? It is not that the female ego imposes itself on the patriarchal text and subdues it, but rather that the female imagination attends to the tensions between androcentric and gynocentric meanings and engages in a hermeneutics of suspicion and of consent. The female imagination refigures the gender plot so that the narrative offers the possibility of a non-hierarchical self for women and for men. In attending to possible gynocentric meanings and to the tensions arising from the various gendered meanings allowed by the text, the female ego is transformed and given its self-identity. From this never-completed process of figuring and refiguring the tradition, the female self is given not in any definitive and concrete way but provisionally and temporally.

What I have presented here is a brief reflection on the possibility of a feminist hermeneutic. Such a hermeneutic can be articulated by con-

tinuing to ask gender questions in the context of the hermeneutic tradition and hermeneutic questions in the context of feminist biblical work. This kind of dialogue can reveal both the workings of a patriarchal tradition and the ways in which it can and is being changed. In speaking of our historical relation to others, Ricoeur says that "like me, my contemporaries, my predecessors and my successors *can* say I" (1978:14).[13] But a patriarchal tradition has failed to acknowledge the possibility and capability of female "I-ness". In feminist writing we witness scholars listening to the "I" of women, both living and dead, and imagining the "I" of those to come. We witness them constructing the female "I" in relation to the self, to other women, and in mutuality with men. This is a difficult and essential task: difficult because the female "I" is expressed in a largely patriarchal tradition, and essential for it is only by this means that a women-centred tradition can be configured. Women are, as Nelle Morton said, "hearing each other into speech". Such is the task indicated by a feminist hermeneutic. It will be well underway when self-identified women can truly say to each other, "I enjoy being I", and men and women can say to each other, "I want you to enjoy being I as much as I enjoy being I". For this to be said, women and men will need to refigure the hierarchical gender plot of the Western narrative tradition.

Notes

1 Self-identity is a problematic term. Postmodern writing dismisses the very possibility of a self. Paul Ricoeur explores the many concepts of self in his recent work (1990). In particular he distinguishes between two versions of identity, *idem* or identity as sameness and *ipse* or identity as selfhood, exemplifying the former by the notion of character which implies permanence through time and the latter by the phenomenon of promise which implies self-constancy. These distinctions are refinements to the narrative identity Ricoeur explores in *Time and Narrative*. Mediating between modern constructions and postmodern deconstructions of self, they present yet another fertile field for the raising of gender questions. The postmodern dismissal of the various concepts of self in the work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault is taken up enthusiastically and adapted in various ways in response to the question of female identity in the feminist writings of Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. Some feminist scholars are beginning to question such wholesale dismissal of the concept of self, however, because it provides poor consolation for women currently engaged in a search for female identity. Morny Joy discusses this problem and the various possibilities of articulating female selfhood in a recent article (1993).

2 Definitions of postmodern hermeneutics can be found in Madison (1988) and in Klemm (1986). Both these authors classify Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur as postmodern hermeneutical thinkers and would rec-

ognise the influence of Martin Heidegger. Postmodern hermeneutics has extended hermeneutics' concern with the interpretation of texts to include questions of the nature of human understanding. Klemm designates four elements in understanding to which postmodern hermeneutics is devoted: temporality, linguisticality, dialogue and appropriation (1986:25-32). In the context of the present chapter it is also relevant to note that Klemm identifies three kinds of subjectivity in Ricoeur's hermeneutics: the naive subject, the critical subject and the reflexive subject (1983:102-108). These various subjectivities have been further refined in Ricoeur's later work (see note 1). The dislodging of the autonomous subject has certainly been a contribution of postmodern hermeneutics.

3 This is a faith statement. It is problematic that Schüssler Fiorenza's reconstruction of the origins of Christianity is based on faith which, as Ross Kraemer points out, leaves open the question of what would be an adequate basis for such a reconstruction for nonbelievers. The problem is that Schüssler Fiorenza claims that she treats the Bible as an historical document and that she is against the doctrinal approach but her work is dotted with faith statements like this one, and it does not include a critique of Jesus' sexist attitudes.

4 In proposing that the capacity to keep one's word is the paradigm of the ethical self, Ricoeur explores, without any analysis of gender, a series of four questions: *Who* speaks? *Who* performs this or that action? *Whose* story is this or that narrative? *Who* is responsible for this damage or that harm done to someone else? (1992b:109-119). In interpreting the Book of Judges, Mieke Bal also asks a series of *who* questions: *Who* speaks? *Who* sees? *Who* acts (1989: 17)? The purpose of her questions is to analyse the gender code and to propose an interpretation of the Book of Judges that is counter-coherent to the received androcentric interpretation. See also her discussion on positions of subjectivity, narrative roles and narrative actions (1988b:35-8).

5 Gadamer is even more critical than Ricoeur of the ways in which scientific methods have, since the Enlightenment, invaded historiography and all the social sciences. Part II of the three-part *Truth and Method* explores this theme, the hermeneutics of historical consciousness.

6 "Self-identified women" is Schüssler Fiorenza's term. "Whereas in feminist conversion *men* must take the option for the oppressed and become women-identified, in such a conversion *women* must seek to overcome our deepest self-alienation. Since all women are socialised to respect and to identify with men, our position of advocacy must be articulated not as an 'option for the oppressed' but as self-respect and self-identification as *women* in a patriarchal society and religion" (1984: xv).

7 Ricoeur postulates that the possibility of the positions of speaker and addressee being exchanged provides the conditions for the emergence of a subject of rights: "when I say 'you', I understand that you are able to des-

ignate yourself as an 'I'" (1992b:111). To the extent that the Western tradition does not say "you" to women, women are deprived of the possibility of becoming subjects with rights. Ricoeur goes on to say: "Like me, the other may designate himself/herself as I when he/she speaks. The phrase 'like me' already implies the recognition of the other as equal to me in terms of rights and duties" (1992b:111). It is this "like me" with its implied recognition of equality that the androcentric tradition has not addressed to women.

8 One of the finest examples of these is Mieke Bal's reading of the two accounts, prose and poetry, of Sisera's death in the Book of Judges (1988a). She deals with six methods or codes, historical, theological, anthropological, literary, thematic and gender, and judges them according to what they make of the differences between the two accounts. She finds that the last two which are the interdisciplinary codes, and particularly the gender code, have the greatest hermeneutic power in interpreting this text.

9 "For it seemed to me that they would not be 'my' readers but the readers of their own selves, my book being merely a sort of magnifying glass like those which the optician at Combray used to offer his customers – it would be my book, but with its help I would furnish them with the means of reading what lay inside themselves" (*Remembrance of Things Past* III:1089).

10 This has been a theme of Ricoeur's work since his hermeneutic turn in *The Symbolism of Evil* (1960). It is also a theme of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960). Gadamer says, for example, that "we cannot extricate ourselves from the historical process, [cannot] so distance ourselves from it that the past becomes an object for us.... We are always situated in history" (quoted by Ricoeur, 1981:73). For Gadamer we belong to history and the tradition much more than they belong to us, so that our understanding and even our critique of the tradition come from the tradition itself.

11 I use the term "deconstruction" in a non-technical sense, though mention of it brings Jacques Derrida to mind. Deconstruction and hermeneutics disagree over the possibility of meaning. For the deconstructionist, meaning is constantly deferred in an endless play of signifiers; for the hermeneuticist, meaning is provisionally possible as the joint work of text and reader (Ricoeur's third mimetic moment of refiguration). The deconstructionist judges the hermeneuticist as too trusting and conservative, while the hermeneuticist believes the deconstructionist too iconoclastic and suspicious. Hermeneutics draws closer to deconstruction, however, in the form of critical hermeneutics or a hermeneutics of suspicion. Ricoeur calls Freud, Marx and Nietzsche the three great "masters of suspicion", and his large work *Freud and Philosophy*, is devoted to the place of a hermeneutics of suspicion in relation to a hermeneutics of consent or of recollection. My reference to the work of deconstruction performed reciprocally by text and reading community should be read in the context of Ricoeur's own work on the necessity for a hermeneutics of suspicion. For

discussions on hermeneutics in relation to deconstruction, see Gallagher (1992:19-24) and Madison's chapter "Beyond Seriousness and Frivolity: A Gadamerian Response to Deconstruction" (1988).

12 Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza may not agree with the way I have constructed her work here. In her latest work, *But She Said* (1992), she writes of the need to shift from a hermeneutical paradigm to a critical feminist rhetorical model (40-50). She understands a hermeneutic method as interpreting the meanings of texts, and rhetorical interpretation as attending to "the kind of sociosymbolic worlds and moral universes biblical discourses produce and to the way these discourses produce them" (46). In her view, the hermeneutical paradigm remains entrenched in the Western tradition's "logic of truth" or "logic of identity", whereas a critical feminist rhetorical model is concerned with the "logic of democracy" (151). Given this understanding of hermeneutical method, I suspect Schüssler Fiorenza would judge my construction of her work as apolitical and universalist, whereas I see it as highly political because it challenges the androcentric assumptions of the Western tradition. Such a challenge is I believe relevant for women whatever their particular experience of oppression may be. My own understanding of hermeneutics (after the manner of Gadamer and Ricoeur) would include the practical political concern for a "logic of democracy" which Schüssler Fiorenza places under the rubric of rhetorical method.

13 See note 7.

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