REVISITING TEXT AND REALITY

BERNARD C LATEGAN

ABSTRACT
This contribution is an attempt to continue a dialogue on the issue of reference in biblical text which has its origin in an interchange with Willem Vorster and which is partly documented in the publication Text and reality. In the first section, the continuing relevance of reference is illustrated by a discussion of a number of contemporary Afrikaans historical novels, where the relationship between (historical) narrative and (historical) ‘reality’ is treated in a very innovative way. In a second section the dynamic nature of reference is discussed in the light of three aspects developed by Ricoeur, namely reference as self-transcendence, as redescription and as an integrative process. In a final section, the inevitable return to reality is explained. It is argued that a better understanding of the function of reference in all its facets holds the key to unlock the transformative potential of these texts in contemporary situations.

"...we are not satisfied with a sense, we presuppose a reference..."
Ricoeur (1977:219), quoting Gottlob Frege

1. INTRODUCTION
The interest of Willem Vorster in biblical texts and related literature of the first century, was multifaceted. Driven by a healthy curiosity (some would say scepticism) and an encyclopaedic grasp of the field, he constantly explored new aspects of this world to which he devoted his academic life. It was almost as if he could not bear not to be abreast with any new development or new approach. But it would also be fair to say that his own interpretation of biblical material was dominated by two strong impulses, directly related to what he considered to be the two most prominent features of these texts, namely their historical and their literary nature.

His interest in the historicity of biblical documents had both a positive and a negative background. His exposure to continental biblical scholarship not only brought him in direct contact with leading historical-critical exponents, but also convinced him that no approach which did not take the historical
nature of these documents seriously had any chance of producing a satisfactory result. Negatively, his own Reformed background and a church tradition with strong fundamentalistic overtones did little to support him in this conviction and prefer to ignore or downplay the issue of historicity. This made him all the more determined to follow the historical line to its logical conclusion. Thus he became perhaps the most consistent exponent of a historical-critical approach in South African biblical scholarship.

On the other hand, recognition of the literary nature of these documents was equally axiomatic in his approach. His linguistic training and proficiency in biblical languages formed the springboard from where he launched his investigation of the gospel genre and numerous studies of biblical narratives, especially of the gospel of Mark. He insisted that these texts be treated in the way they were written, namely as narratives and that the key to their understanding lies in the effect these narratives had on first and later readers. He once said that he found a soul mate in Norman Petersen, who, despite his expertise in literary theory, always insisted that he was a historian by trade and by instinct.

However, the tension underlying these two aspects cannot be denied—both in terms of their interaction on the textual level and in terms of the philosophical basis of both approaches. The structuralist and semiotic underfelt of Vorster’s linguistic and literary carpeting was clear enough—leading to his insistence on ‘text-immanent’ exegesis and his empathy with Petersen’s option for texts as mirrors rather than windows (see Vorster 1985:54). But this only raised a far more fundamental hermeneutic problem, namely the relationship between a narrative and its reference. ‘If we say that biblical narratives represent reality, what do we mean? Is a parable a replica of reality, a representation of reality, an illustration of reality, an icon or symbol of reality?’ (Vorster 1985:57). He readily concedes that Mark, for example, made use of ‘real world people’ to fill the narrative roles he created in his story of Jesus and that the whole text is embedded in the history of first-century Palestine. That is why one has to know the language and the ‘real’ world of the text. ‘This does not, however, help us to answer the question of a text and its reference. What do the disciples in Mark, for example, represent?’ (1985:57). He then refers to Best’s proposal of four possible roles: the original disciples (a purely historical position); a group claiming to continue the position of the original disciples; some other contemporary group, like the church as a whole or as part of the church, or finally, a purely informative role, that is, ‘Mark might believe that past history should determine the present and we should learn from the past’ (1985:58).

According to Vorster, this example illustrates ‘the problem of New Testament research on the text and reference in nuce’ (:58). And that also formed the basis of an ongoing dialogue of which Text and reality represents the
uncompleted and fragmentary record. Revisiting this collection of four essays, it seems a fitting tribute to continue the conversation, which Vorster would be more than willing and ready to take up again and to rebut my suggestions with the same gusto as in the past.

Before picking up the threads again, it might be useful to take note that also in non-theological circles, the debate about reference is continuing.

2 THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF REFERENCE

To put the debate about reference in biblical texts in perspective, it could be useful to look at recent developments in contemporary Afrikaans literature. Since the beginning of the 1990's, a whole collection of historical novels appeared in Afrikaans from well-known authors like Jeanne Goosen, Lettie Viljoen, Etienne van Heerden, André P Brink, Anna M Louw, Klaas Steytler, John Miles, Zirk van den Berg and Eben Venter. The importance of these works for our purpose is twofold: they all deal with the problem of the representation of historical events and data in fictional form and they clearly reveal post-modern influences, thereby reflecting a stage of the debate quite later than the publication of Text and reality in 1985. It would appear that the question of reference is as much an issue in post-modern literature as it was ten years ago.

In this discussion, I make extensive and grateful use of an unpublished paper and references to other authors by Louise Viljoen, presented to the Stellenbosch Literary Forum on 2 November 1993.

Instead of treating history as transcendental and empirical reality, it is seen in post-modern circles as a ‘form of understanding’ and as such subject to all the complexities associated with representation, interpretation and narrative (Young 1990:22 as quoted by Viljoen). There is no direct access to historical knowledge and the presentation of historical events in terms of language is even more problematic, once it is realised that language is a far from perfect vehicle for this purpose. White (1978:30) refers to the mistaken assumption of historiographers who think that ‘language can serve as a perfectly transparent medium of representation and who think that if one can only find the right language for describing events, the meaning of events will display itself to consciousness’.

Historical ‘facts’ that purportedly have been distilled from events, are therefore not hard data, but discursive constructions within a specific paradigm produced by means of metaphors, icons, images and values which affects their understanding substantially. From a post-modernist perspective, history can therefore be understood as a text containing all the attributes ascribed to it by post-structuralism. This text is a differential network, a process rather than a completed product, whose meaning cannot be closed off in a definitive rendering. The historical event thus becomes a text, subject to constant unravelment,
without arriving at a final interpretation. Such a Vertextung of history has profound implications for the status of historical documents. They are no longer understood as neutral or passive, but as the loaded interpretations of historical events—events whose creative and transforming potential is exploited. In this way, historical material is drawn into the process of recycling of texts and displays its intertextual power, which is so typical of postmodern tendencies. The author of historical fiction, and for that matter, any author, therefore becomes a 're-scriptor' of already existing texts (Viljoen 1993:2, quoting Hutcheon 1989:49). The historicity of the historiographer and of the historical novelist is thereby highlighted—he or she is also a text which forms part of the intertextual and unfinished process of history and is subject to all inherent social forces of sex, race, class, ethnicity and the like.

At the same time, post-modern historiography challenges the concept of history as totality and of history as an orderly, continuous process, proceeding teleologically to a specific goal. Discontinuity becomes an important tool of historiography. Instead of homogeneity and searching for causality and analogy, historians now also focus on the interaction between different discourses which resist incorporation and totalisation.

In so far as both are subject to the dense, non-transparent and mediating nature of language, representation in historiography and in fiction displays a certain similarity (see Viljoen 1993:2). It is in this context that White (1978:121) speaks of 'the literature of fact' and 'the fictions of factual representation'. Factors like suppression, repetition, subordination, foregrounding, concealment, misunderstanding and carelessness play just an important role in historiography as in literature. The renewed interest in the role of narrative in historiography raises doubts whether the supposedly clear distinction between historiography and literature and between fact and fiction still holds. Fiction is recognised more and more as a genre which can holds its own in competing with historiography proper as a 'vehicle for historical truth' (McHale 1987:96).

How this challenge is taken up, can be seen from a new generation of historical novels, of which the Afrikaans authors quoted above are prominent exponents. In comparison with the more traditional historical novel, there is no attempt to hide the transition from history to fiction or to keep the illusion of historical credibility in tact. In fact, the transitions are clearly marked and even publicised by means of contradictions, transpositioning of or additions to official historical records, the use of newspaper cuttings, footnotes, illustrations, open anachronisms and the merging of history and fantasy. The illusion of both fact and fiction is constantly shattered and a tension is built up around the dividing line between these two. These typical post-modern techniques enables the authors to develop and present different versions and different perceptions of the same set of historical data.
In the case of Lettie Viljoen's novel, *Belemmering*, the 'official' Afrikaner version of the subcontinent's history forms the master narrative, to be contrasted with the version of the Afrikaner rebel who joins the struggle and justifies his actions in terms of other strands of the tradition, noticeably the guerrilla hero Christiaan de Wet. A third perspective is that of the modern army general, who initially goes along with the official version, but who develops more and more doubts as discrepancies, brutality and injustices increase. The main woman character tries to trace her own family history in the midst of this confusion. The story suggests that there are more than one rhetorical strategy with which to handle the representation of history—and illustrates something of the confusion and horror with which the text of the patriarchal history is read by the author.

In Etienne van Heerden's *Casspiks en Campari*, the focus is on a different aspect of historiography, namely the tension between a holistic and a fragmented perspective on history. On the one hand, there is the urge to draw the fragments of historical experience together in a definitive and final meta-narrative. On the other hand, there is the disruption of a post-modernistic kind. The latter is achieved by the author's self-reflection, variations of style and points of view and other disruptions. This tension is reminiscent of the debate between Marxism and Deconstruction during the eighties. The two positions are represented in the novel by the characters Erwin and Sarel. Sarel despairs of the possibility to produce a meta-narrative that will make sense of all the historical contradictions in the country. Nor does an explanation in terms of a Marxist class struggle satisfies him. Erwin, despite the obvious difficulties and current preference for short stories and similar short-span genres, still maintains that the genre of the novel with its broader sweep and longer perspective, can make a healing contribution and provide a more comprehensive grasp of the present confusion. His own decision to write such a novel, implies a choice for comprehensiveness and holism. It represents an attempt to break through the confines of this interregnum and to provide hope for others caught in the same confusion.

Perhaps the most interesting example for our purpose is the 1993 novel of André P Brink *Inteendeel*, in which he explores the possibility of historical fiction as affirmative action. The main character, Estienne Barbier, was indeed a historical figure, born in 1799 in France, who came to the Cape in 1834 and who was executed in 1839 for rebellion against the authorities. The book deviates from the traditional historical novel in important respects. The latter does not contradict existing historical evidence and relies on improvisation only to fill in in a credible way those 'dark areas' where records are scarce or non-existent. Brink expands these dark areas in Barbier's life in a most innovative and creative way, adding three travels to the interior for which no evi-
dence exists. It thus becomes a kind of apocryphal history, in which the official version is not only supplemented, but also rewritten in important respects. If the latter is said to be the record of the conqueror, Brink is attempting to write back into history the story of a loser, of an unsuccessful insurrection. In some respects Brink is writing himself and his own time into the story, thereby consciously violating the boundaries of established history. Barbier speaks in Derridian terms and knows Don Quixote. He becomes a living example of the game of history and of the subjectivity and uncertainty of historical facts.

The book can be read as an attempt at affirmative action on different levels—on the level of Barbier’s history, but also that of Brink. The record of the three journeys into the interior is used to propose different perspectives on the same events. On the first journey, Barbier is the self-assured Euro-centrist, looking down on the indigenous population, on the second, he enthusiastically participates in a rape of the countryside and its peoples. The third (fictitious) journey acts as a corrective on the first two, in which Barbier tries to make amends for his previous misdeeds and seeks forgiveness for his disregard of human dignity and injustice regarding women, the country, its original inhabitants and wild life. In the person of Barbier, Brink is clearly interfering with history and attempting to address their (Barbier’s and Brink’s) part in and responsibility for the injustices of the past. The title of the book (To the contrary) is therefore descriptive not only of Barbier’s defiant reaction to his circumstances. It should also be read as the novel’s way of saying ‘to the contrary’ to history. In the last instance it is an invitation to the reader to contradict the novel and in doing so, to continue the process of re-writing history (see Viljoen 1993:7).

What has this excursus into contemporary literature to do with our topic of reference and reality in biblical material? It highlights three important aspects of our problem. Firstly, the interpretative nature of historical accounts and the difficulty to keep ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ neatly separated. Secondly, the constant process of re-writing or re-description which takes place in the transmission of material and thirdly, the almost inevitable involvement of present writers and readers not only in making sense of history, but also in becoming personally caught up in the process—even up to the point of attempting to re-make history. These aspects are of direct relevance for biblical material (cf for instance Deist 1993) and we shall return to them in the following sections.

3 REFERENCE TO WHAT?

From what has been said so far, the concept ‘reference’ in itself is in need of further clarification. The first question is: what kind of reference are we talking about? Intra- inter- or extra-textual reference? Or rather: reference to what? One way would be to take the well-known classification of reference behind, in
or in front of the text as point of departure. *Reference behind* the text would then normally include allusions, indirect and explicit referrals to the historical background of the text, its time of origin, historical figures, events, social and political structures of the time, but also of preceding times and normally anything that has to do with the historical dimension of the text. This type of reference would be extra-textual by nature. *Reference in* would be referrals which function inside the world of the text, within the narrative or the argument of the text and is therefore intra-textual by nature. *Reference in front of* the text has to do with what the text suggests, opens up, makes possible, leads to, produces, achieves and is by nature again extra-textual.

This classification of types of reference may be useful as far as it goes, but it soon becomes clear that further qualifications are needed. We have already referred to the characterisation of the disciples in Mark and their four possible roles as proposed by Best (see §1). Vorster (1985:57) rightly insists that knowledge about the ‘real’ world of first century Palestine does not help us to solve the question what the text means. The first possible role, the disciples as themselves, is a form of reference behind the text, a purely historical position. The following two roles, that of a group claiming to continue the line of the original disciples or a group of the church, are examples of reference in the text, while the last possibility, that they have a purely informative role for the benefit of the present reader, would be reference in front of the text.

In a parallel study on discipleship in Matthew, Patte (1991) deals with the same issues from a different perspective. His aim is to demonstrate that the quest for a single interpretation or coherence in each given text is not feasible and that it should be abandoned in favour of a positive acceptance of a diversity of coherences. To illustrate his point, he argues that at least four different interpretations of discipleship is possible in Matthew—each one completely legitimate in its own right. But, like in the case of Best on Mark, these different coherences are the answers to four different questions and four types of reference. What can be gleaned from the text with regard to the disciples as historical personages? (Reference behind the text). In what way does the story of the disciples form a narrative on its own? (Reference in the text). In what way can the disciples be understood as models for discipleship? (Reference in front of the text). What are the basic conditions for discipleship according to Matthew? (Reference in/in front of the text).

Vorster (1985:57) is therefore right in his assumption that Ricoeур and his followers in their use of redescription are not concerned with the same problem as the followers of Jakobson, with whom it is natural to speak of the referential function of the text as something purely internal or immanent.

The critical point is not merely to distinguish the different types and forms of reference, but to come to a clearer understanding of the relationship between
them. There is indeed an inter-dependence and an inter-relationship, which, in a dynamic process of interaction, constitute the full scope of reference. In order to describe this process, the dynamic nature of reference needs to be brought into focus. We propose to do this by enlisting Paul Ricoeur’s views on metaphor and the creation of meaning in texts.

4 THE DYNAMIC NATURE OF REFERENCE

The main focus of Ricoeur’s seminal study *The rule of metaphor* is certainly not reference, but rather the creation of meaning in language. Nonetheless, reference is a recurring theme in these multi-disciplinary studies and the seventh study is devoted specifically to the relationship between metaphor and reference. We will therefore not follow the main line of Ricoeur’s argument, but draw from his work three aspects which are important for our present topic: reference as self-transcendence, reference as redescription and reference as an integrative process.

4.1 Reference as self-transcendence

‘We are not satisfied with a sense, we presuppose a reference’. This insight of Gottlob Frege which Ricoeur (see 1977:219) adapts for his own purposes, touches on one of the most fundamental characteristics of reference, namely its self-transcending nature. Reference represents an inexorable drive towards the signified which cannot be stopped prematurely and which in fact makes the whole process of communication possible. This implies that reference can only be conceived of as a process. It is this characteristic which lends to the metaphor its power and which inevitably leads Ricoeur to find the locus of the metaphor not in the word, but in the statement or sentence. If, in a preliminary definition, metaphor is described as giving an unaccustomed name to something, this transposition already presupposes a movement in nuce.

But the investigation of the interrelationships of meaning that give rise to this transposition of the name also relentlessly forces open the frame of reference determined by the word, and *a fortiori* that determined by the name or noun, and imposes the *statement* as the sole contextual milieu within which the transposition of meaning takes place (Ricoeur 1977:65).

If we are to progress beyond identifying and naming metaphors to ‘showing how it is brought about’, we must move from sign to sentence.

The option for the *sentence* as the unit of discourse instead of the *word* (following a suggestion by Benveniste), represents a key element in Ricoeur’s thinking. It is indicative of a move from a static (naming, identifying, substituting) to a dynamic (word-in-use, production) understanding of metaphor. At the same time, it reveals much about his view of language as a whole.
Metaphor is to be understood as the ‘constitutive form of language’ (80), which means that the movement of discourse and the dynamic behind reference is set in motion by a dialectical tension between a whole series of oppositions, of which the contrast between semantics and semiotics is one of the most important.

The option for semantics in favour of semiotics is Ricoeur’s way of providing a methodological basis to explain the dynamic nature of reference. Again following Benveniste, he insists that these two concepts represent two different kinds of linguistics (68). Although the sentence is formed by words, it constitutes a whole which is not reducible to the sum of its parts and—what is important for the issue of reference—the meaning inherent in this whole is distributed over the totality of the constituents as an ensemble. ‘Rather than there being a linear progression from one unit to the other, then, new properties appear, which derive from this specific relationship between units of different levels’ (67). Where semiotics, according to this view, deals with the relationship between signs of words as separate entities, semantics deals with words-in-combination, or rather, words-in-interaction.

From this perspective, a series of dialectical pairs come into play. The first is that discourse always occurs as an event, but is to be understood as meaning (70). By this is meant that the linguistic system, because it is synchronic, has only virtual existence and has to be realised or actualised in a specific act of language use. But this language event, precisely because of its individual and localised nature, is fleeting and transitory. What actually lends durability and continuity to the process, is that the event can be identified and reidentified as ‘the same’. This is what meaning entails. It is dependent on the repeatability of the event and on the possibility to identify it as ‘the same’.

Recognising the ‘event character’ of discourse, as well as the formation and transfer of meaning, makes it possible to differentiate further, like Grice’s distinction between ‘utterance meaning’, ‘meaning of the utterance’ and ‘utterer’s meaning’ (70). It also makes it possible to set off the instance of discourse from its intention. These distinctions have specific relevance for the different forms of reference, making clear that reference on the semiotic level is of a different nature compared to reference on the semantic level. It is for this reason that Ricoeur maintains that semiotics and semantics belong to two different orders.

The second pair concerns the distinction between the identifying and the predicative function of discourse. This contrast is responsible for the fundamental polarity of language. The identifying function is in essence a process of reduction, aimed at singling out the logical subject of the discourse, naming a specific individual or thing. The predicative function is a process of expansion and qualification, weaving a network of relations. It is this dissymmetry
between two functions which makes language work (see :71). What is further of great importance, is that the identifying (and singularising) function is always linked to what exists, while the predicative function concerns the non-existent. For the introduction of what is new, for alternatives, for a different perspective on reality, the predicative function becomes critical, as we shall see. (For those versed in discourse analysis based on the kölon as unit, it is interesting that Ricoeur follows Benveniste in the view that the predicate is sufficient in itself to be the criterion of units of discourse. This is exactly the grammatical basis of the kölon).

Thirdly, the structure of the acts of discourse also reveals different functions. When using language, one is doing different things on different levels. In terms of the well-known distinction of Austin between the locutionary and perlocutionary force of a speech act, and consequently between constatives and performatives (see :72-73), one can state, order, promise or request. The modality of the sentence is directly linked to its force. Acknowledging the pragmatic dimension of language also means that the scope of reference becomes wider. More than logical propositions belongs to language—‘psychological’ elements like belief, desire, feelings can be anchored in language.

The fourth pair (see :73-74) is Frege’s concepts of sense (Sinn) and reference (Bedeutung), making it possible to separate what is said from that of which one speaks and illustrating that the same referent can have two senses (evening/morning star). On the level of the word or language in abstracto there is no real reference problem, as signs refer internally to other signs in the system. However, on the level of the sentence and of discourse (language-in-use), the situation changes and language can no longer be contained within itself. ‘In the phenomenon of the sentence, language passes outside itself; reference is the mark of the self-transcendence of language’ (:74). Nothing illustrates the difference between semiotics and semantics clearer than this distinction. But it also brings the relationship between language and the world into play and discloses the mediating function of language. Two aspects are important for what will follow later. Firstly, in some way language mediates between humans and world, integrating them with society. Secondly, external reference does not eliminate or abolish internal reference within the system—both forms are interdependent.

External reference can be linked to the notion of the intended, because this is what reaches beyond language. Ricoeur therefore supports Husserl’s phenomenological analysis based on intentionality. ‘Language is intentional par excellence; it aims beyond itself’ (:74).

Fifthly, a distinction should be made between reference to reality and to the speaker. To the extent that discourse refers to something outside itself, it also
refers to the author/speaker. But this can only happen on the level of discourse. Personal pronouns are 'neutral' or 'non-referential' by themselves. It is only as part of discourse that it becomes possible to identify the 'I' or 'you' or 'he' or 'she'. Letter-writing—and the letters of the New Testament are a good case in point—illustrates this even better, marking the discourse both spatially and temporally. What Ricoeur only touches on, became a central theme in reception theory with its focus on the implied author and reader.

Finally, Ricoeur deals with the redistribution of the spheres of the paradigmatic and the syntagmatic. Paradigmatic alternatives clearly belong to the semiotic order, while the syntagmatic net of relations provides the basis for the sentence, putting into effect the connecting power of discourse. Identification and substitution are functions which operate in the context of semiotics, while the metaphorical process forms part and parcel of the broader semantic process.

The dynamic nature of discourse and the inexorable drive to move beyond itself lends strength and creativity to reference. How this energy is harnessed to effect changes in perception and action, brings us to the crucial aspect of reference.

4.2 Reference as redescription
The power of discourse is not undirected, nor is reference aimless. Discourse in its pragmatic form is aimed at persuasion and change. The rhetorical intent of discourse and the issue of reference are therefore intimately connected. In this section, we shall concentrate on the role of reference in effecting shifts—shifts in language, effecting shifts in meaning, aimed at shifts in understanding, perception and action. 'Ordinary conversation consists in following these shifts, and rhetoric should teach their mastery' (:79). The focus for Ricoeur is of course on metaphor, but the implications for discourse remain the same. According to his view, the metaphor holds together within one simple meaning two different missing parts of different contexts of a composite meaning.

Thus, we are not dealing any longer with a simple transfer of words, but with a commerce between thoughts, that is, a transaction between contexts. If metaphor is a competence, a talent, then it is a talent of thinking. Rhetoric is just the reflection and the translation of this talent into a distinct body of knowledge (:80).

How is this transaction between contexts achieved? The first requirement is to bring two diverse, unusual, novel elements together in the context of a single metaphor or of a specific text. These contrasting elements (see :85) have been called the tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor (Richards) or its focus and frame (Black). The combination must strike a note, establish an obvious connection, but also a difference between the two elements. Once these conditions
have been met, the process of interaction can be set in motion. For this, a delicate balance must be maintained between the known and the unknown, between the old and the new. If the difference is too big, a shift cannot take place and the metaphor will not work. If it is too small, it will like-wise not succeed, because not enough new information is offered. On the one hand, the two elements must be close enough to ensure a spark of recognition or resemblance. On the other, there must be sufficient difference and distance to arouse curiosity and to achieve a shift. A theory of metaphor that is based merely on the idea of substitution or ornamentation is therefore bound to fail, because the metaphorical event entails much more than simply exchanging one element for another—a new entity is created in the process.

What is true of the metaphor, becomes even clearer on the level of discourse. In a more extended text, the scope for redescription is that much bigger. An alternative understanding of reality can be offered, an alternative position can be described in much more detail. In narrative texts, redescription can take the form of an alternative point of view or the offering of different roles with which the reader can identify. In argumentative texts, alternative positions or perspectives are developed with the help of logical and/or rhetorical devices. The insights offered by metaphors and alternative roles delineated in narratives, can add up to a more comprehensive understanding of reality and in this way representing a ‘proposed world’—a world the reader may adopt or inhabit. We are therefore not satisfied with the structure of the work, we presuppose a world of the work (:220). In this way the structure of the work becomes the sense, the world of the work its reference. ‘Hermeneutics then is simply the theory that regulates the transition from structure of the work to world of the work’ (:220). Should such a transition take place, the shifting process has reached its (preliminary) goal.

Can more be said about how exactly the shift takes place? We have already referred to the fact that the process of reference implies an interaction or exchange between two contexts. This exchange only becomes possible when reference in the descriptive, literal sense is suspended in favour of what can be called ‘poetic’ reference.

The literary work through the structure proper to it displays a world only under the condition that the reference of descriptive discourse is suspended. Or to put it another way, discourse in the literary work sets out its denotation as a second-level denotation, by means of the suspension of the first-level denotation of discourse (:221).

The shift is therefore achieved by the interaction between suspended reference and displayed reference. ‘Just as the metaphorical statement captures its sense as metaphorical midst the ruins of the literal sense, so it achieves its reference upon the ruins of what might be called (in symmetrical fashion) its literal
reference’ (:221). The reference of the work and its proposed world can only be set free if its first-order reference is suspended.

The difference between suspended and displayed reference alerts us to an important aspect, namely the ambiguity that is always part of reference. Phonic equivalence leads to the assumption of semantic equivalence, which equivalence is then shattered. Semantic ambiguity is continued by other forms of ambiguity that affects all functions of communication and which appears in the form of split addressers, split addressees and split reference. This ambiguity is best expressed in the exordium of fairy tales, like that of the Majorca storytellers: ‘It was and it was not’, which for Ricoeur expresses in nuce all that can be said about metaphorical truth (:224).

To move from the single metaphor to the world of the text may seem quite a distance. But the same dynamic is at work and Ricoeur therefore prefers to talk of the metaphorical process. Metaphors do not function in isolation and become most effective if their referential function is carried by a metaphoric network rather than by an isolated metaphorical statement (:244). How such a network is developed to offer eventually a comprehensive alternative view of the whole of reality and existence, is very well illustrated in the Pauline letters. Paul is fond of using theological ‘formulas’ (in Christ, under the law, through faith). These formulas are nodes of a whole network of theological ideas which form the building blocks of his theology (cf Lategan 1991).

In the redescriptive function of reference, both elements of the term are important. The ‘re’ presupposes a certain measure of familiarity, of known territory from which to push off into the unknown. What is described, is an alternative view of reality—consistent in itself, but different from what precedes. How different, is often lost in the subsequent process of re-familiarisation. The domestication of metaphors robs them of their power. The same happens in the ongoing interpretation of biblical texts. The radical nature of Jesus’ teaching, which proposes a complete reversal of the status quo and of existing values (‘You have heard that it is said…but I tell you’) is often obscured by subsequent interpretations. However, redescription means that something completely new can be introduced. Here the creative and innovative potential of language, and especially of fiction, comes into its own. We have seen with what inventiveness contemporary authors use historical material and literary imagination in order to present an alternative perspective on the same material to the reader. Reading requires the same kind of imagination and inventiveness in order to be successful.
4.3 Reference as an integrative process

A final aspect of importance is the interaction between the different forms of reference. Ricoeur constantly stresses that the sentence as unit of discourse is not a mosaic, but an organism (:79). The metaphor works because all elements interact—the plus it produces is not a summation of the parts, but a new entity. This also enables us to respect the different forms of reference. Talk of the suspension of first-order reference may create the mistaken impression that it is abolished. We have already seen that metaphor can best be described as an event which takes place where several semantic fields intersect. Recognising the impossibility of a literal interpretation of a metaphor does not lead to its abolition by a metaphorical interpretation, but submits to it while resisting (:256).

The implication of the above is that we need not choose between the different forms of reference. All aspects of reference function together to create meaning. Reference in front of the text is not the abolishment of other forms of reference, but is in fact built on these forms and dependent on them for success. To know what a Pharisee is (reference behind the text), to understand to what it refers as part of the discourse of Matthew 23 (reference in the text) is essential for discovering the meaning in front of the text. The statement by Vorster in Text and reality (1985:61) points in the same direction, namely that narratives are not merely windows or mirrors—they are both. We do not have to choose, but we need to differentiate in order to allow the free and full flow of the text.

5 THE RETURN TO REALITY

Ricoeur's insistence to move from word to sentence and from semiotics to semantics is symptomatic of the inevitable oscillation of reference towards the present reality of the reader. The reference behind the text provides the push-off point, the reference in the text a detour in order to gain a new perspective on and a new entrance to the present reality. In our discussion of modern Afrikaans novels, it became clear how historiography and literary devices are exploited in order to break through fossilised positions and to offer an alternative understanding of history. The anachronistic or rather post-modern attempt to rewrite history, is not only an attempt to redeem the past, but also to provide a new beginning for the present reader. In biblical texts, the persuasive intention is even more prominent and the alternative offered in the form of poetic, narrative and argumentative discourse, so extensive that it offers a comprehensive new understanding of the self and of reality. In biblical terms, this discourse is aimed at conversion, re-birth and resurrection. A better understanding of the function of reference in all its forms holds the key to unlock the transformative potential of these texts in contemporary situations.
WORKS CONSULTED


Prof Dr B C Lategan, Dean, Faculty of Arts, University of Stellenbosch, STELLENBOSCH, 7600 Republic of South Africa