

Michele Kueter Petersen. *A Hermeneutics of Contemplative Silence: Paul Ricoeur, Edith Stein, and the Heart of Meaning.* Lexington Books 2021. 238 pp. \$100 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781793640000).

In *A Hermeneutics of Contemplative Silence: Paul Ricoeur, Edith Stein, and the Heart of Meaning*, Michelle Kueter Petersen has undertaken an ambitious, even audacious project. At the outset she states her intention is ‘to develop a hermeneutics of the religious phenomenon of contemplative silence that is in conversation with the philosophical hermeneutics of Ricoeur’ in order ‘to locate the role of silence in the creation of meaning’ (xvii). The key, operational concept in this project is that of *conversation*. This means more than mere juxtaposition. Petersen’s intention is to allow Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology to provide a conceptual groundwork for understanding the significance of contemplative silence. Then to use Edith Stein’s writing to be an exemplary response, an adaptation and an extension of Ricoeur. In effect, this is a ‘reading back,’ carrying Ricoeur from philosophy into mystical Christian theology. However, it may not result in the kind of exchange implied by the term ‘conversation.’

Petersen is aware of the conceptual obstacles she faces. Perhaps most basic to these is that while she wants to make use of Ricoeur’s thought for her hermeneutics of contemplative silence, she admits: ‘Ricoeur rarely, if ever, discusses silence’ (xx). This would not only be in relationship to contemplative practices, but also ‘he does not take up the role of silence in relation to discourse’ (xii). For Stein’s part, the author traces the arc of her life, taking her from student of Husserl to the Carmelite order, and recounting her conversion from Judaism to Christianity. This would place Stein more on the side of theological reflection than philosophy. Yet, as Petersen comments, the philosophical inclinations she maintained were more ‘a kind of stoicism commended by the philosopher, Epictetus’ (xii). This too, as I will comment below, marks Stein’s distance from Ricoeur.

Essentially the task Peterson has set for herself is to build bridges of conceptual connections between Ricoeur and Stein. This is a rather arduous endeavor, one Petersen meticulously pursues. As near as this reviewer can tell, they were not familiar with one another’s writing. Stein died in the Holocaust before World War II was over, meaning before Ricoeur’s extensive career as a published philosopher began. This results in an implicit suggestion that Ricoeur has overlooked Stein. As a result of her retrospective application of Ricoeur, Petersen may convince the reader that Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology may be a valid frame for understanding both contemplative silence and Stein’s writing and spiritual journey, but she is less convincing when it comes to implying that Ricoeur would have benefited from taking contemplative, Carmelite practice into consideration.

This is not to imply that Petersen’s bridge-building is itself abridged. It is not. She is thorough and complete in her necessarily condensed exposition of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics and how it leads to his ontology. She employs many core Ricoeur texts, from *Fallible Man* to *Memory, History, Forgetting*, and includes many other articles by Ricoeur, as well as many commentators on him. Petersen’s scope is broad and, considering how expertly she condenses her exposition into two



chapters, her achievement is remarkable.

Then, of course, she comes up against the lack of discussion of silence in Ricoeur. To address this, in chapter 3 Petersen transitions from Ricoeur to Bernard Dauenhauer's text, *Silence*, to provide a phenomenological link to her interest in contemplative silence as a religious and spiritual practice. Simultaneously, Petersen is shifting her focus from philosophy to theology. As she puts it, contemplation is 'consistently employed in a manner which has to do with a deeper awareness of a divine presence' (69).

This indicates Petersen's position, broadly stated. In chapter 4 she lays the groundwork for appreciating Stein by offering a history of contemplative silence in the Christian religion. Her historical account spans from Origen (CA. 185-255) to Thomas Merton (1915-1968), including, of course, Edith Stein (1891-1942). By chapter 5, Petersen builds on this history to bridge to the 'Carmelite school of spirituality' as the religious context for Stein's contemplative practice and philosophical theological writing. Petersen begins chapter 6 by saying: 'I want to connect the intentionality and practice of contemplative silence to the heart of meaning in language' (114). What sets *contemplative* silence apart for her is that it is a 'form of silence in which the depth of meaning is held in consciousness amid silence' (115). This aim leads to one of the more remarkable series of paragraphs in Petersen's book, where she begins with what she calls Heidegger's unfinished 'project' of connecting 'the meaning of being' to 'being itself,' then references Ricoeur's position that 'a mode of being must occur in language,' followed by Stein's claim for 'an unfolding of some new meaning' in a 'limit experience of finitude' (121-122). Petersen says Stein's view is: 'Finite being as temporal being cannot possess its being and has to receive it from moment to moment, while eternal being "must be its very act of existing"' (122). The author then states: 'it is clear that the aim of this study is a hermeneutical project, and not an onto-theological program' (122). Yet I am not certain that this is accurate. I have the impression that Petersen's conversation between Ricoeur and Stein entails not only using Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology to interpret Stein but also to adapt Stein's theology to Ricoeur's philosophy. What results is the implication that hermeneutics as a philosophical field has at its core not only ontological claims but also *theological* ones. To me, this seems to take not only Ricoeur but also Heidegger beyond the boundaries of the philosophical discipline they maintained for themselves. In other words, I had the impression that Petersen had built a bridge too far. It is not as if Petersen has not prepared the reader to consider this possibility. For instance, she has a, I want to say *habit* of gliding over from philosophy to theology in how she expresses herself. For instance, the author claims: 'I can say that the recognition of feeling lost and abandoned points to the nothingness of the human being who in humility stands before the reality of the Word' (53). This is a theological statement. By the end of chapter 3 Petersen is moving from speaking of 'the practice of contemplative silence [being] what Ricoeur refers to as 'an idle forgetting' (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, University of Chicago Press 2000, 504-5),' to contemplative practice bringing about a 'transformation' in the practitioner by an 'appearance' that 'can be a symbol of God' (62). This, she says, 'is a theological recognition.' Indeed.

Where Petersen encounters problematic claims is when she makes statements like the

following: '[Ricoeur] sees the mode of being as God itself, and the mode of being as symbol. I understand this mode of being as a manifestation of being itself' (136). What Petersen claims for her own project is one thing, but what she claimed for Ricoeur's here goes beyond what *he* would have claimed for himself—indicated by the fact that she supports this statement with a reference to a third party, Robert Scharlemann. This is only to say that Ricoeur did not think of himself as writing in the field of philosophical theology—although Edith Stein might well have understood her writing that way.

This observation is not intended to detract from the enlightening effort Petersen has made in this book. In chapter 7 she asks and addresses significant questions, e.g., 'What does [contemplative] practice mean for the capable human?' She answers: transformation. Then: 'Does transformed consciousness exist?' (149). To answer, the author blends Ricoeur's concepts with those of John of the Cross and 'the language of the Carmelite tradition' to show 'how the transformations have been actualized' (149). This is exceedingly ambitious—yet the coherence of Petersen's synthesis, as Ricoeur might say, 'gives rise to thought.'

As may be obvious by now, I had some mixed thoughts about how Petersen stretched Ricoeur beyond himself in order to bring him into conversation with Stein and her understanding of contemplative silence. As I have indicated, incidences of this occur early in Petersen's presentation when she notes that Ricoeur rarely if ever took an interest in silence. Then, when she concludes with a Postlude offering the concept of a 'Third Naïveté,' the author explains: 'A "third naïveté" not only breathes, sees, and hears, but responds to language as well as the silence that resides in the spaces of my moving relations of meaning in my being in the world.' Fine enough, but she then adds: 'This is precisely what is unthought in the work of Ricoeur' (185). Perhaps, but it is a bit ungracious to say this of him, for the 'third naïveté' is essentially, for Petersen, a 'mystical consciousness' (188), more in the realm of contemplative theology than hermeneutic phenomenology. Which is to say, outside of Ricoeur's scope.

Because I am positively impressed with Petersen's sustained and ambitious effort to bring together two thoughtful 20th century persons who others might have taken to be too distant from one another, I want to conclude with what I hope Petersen will take to be a few constructive suggestions as she continues the arc of this project beyond this book.

First, I would suggest that Petersen explore Gabriel Marcel's influence on Ricoeur. Like Stein, Marcel chose Roman Catholicism. His terminology, especially 'the mystery of being,' would bring him close to Stein. Moreover, second, Marcel's insistence on the *incarnational* bases of the human experience reverberates throughout Ricoeur's work but especially in *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. There, Ricoeur's focus on Orphism over Stoicism has many marks of Marcel and implications that might contribute to Petersen's developing Ricoeur's and Stein's conversation. In particular, what Ricoeur has to say there about *song* and poetry would be an interesting philosophical context to use in contemplative interpretation of the biblical *Song of Songs*. Finally, while Petersen's effort to elaborate on the spiritual benefit of contemplative practice being personal *transformation*, Ricoeur in *Freedom and Nature*, speaks about making what he calls 'the metaphysical choice' (*Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*, Northwestern

University Press 1966, 466), which he says ‘is a choice concerning Transcendence’ (Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature*, 467). Although Ricoeur remains on the side of philosophy, his position here comes close to the theological statements Petersen says Stein makes in terms of Word, God, and the Divine.

In short, Petersen would likely find more in *Freedom and Nature* to support her affirmation of Ricoeur’s contribution to her book on contemplative silence, which, she says, she has written ‘in the spirit of Ricoeur who is always probing the mystery of existence’ (177). Here Petersen captures both Ricoeur and Marcel’s influence upon him.

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