

## **Reading nature as text: towards an environmental hermeneutics and space identity awareness in Portuguese eco-culture**

Key-words: Landscape, Interpretation, Biodiversity, Selfhood, Sustainability

### **1. Background**

Concerns about the environment and the acknowledgment of human emplacement have led in the last few years to the emergence of a new philosophical discipline. The 'emerging field of environmental hermeneutics' (Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen & Utsler 2014) intends to interpret and understand the complex interactions between human beings and the natural environment. In its most robust sense, environmental hermeneutics seeks to understand how our 'hermeneutical consciousness' (Gadamer's concept) enlightens our relationship with environments. There is no doubt that, «as beings with physical bodies, our embodiment implies our emplacement» (Clingerman and Dixon 2011: ix). Or, as Heidegger said, 'to be is to dwell', but to dwell implies changing the environment and landscape in which we dwell for better and for worse. In turn, the places we inhabit influence our identity – who we are, what we do, and how we conceive ourselves in relation to other human beings, non-human animals and the wider natural environment. Understanding these complex influences and interactions is essential to determine how we interpret who and what we are and how we emplace ourselves in the world.

Given this stance, environmental hermeneuticists have proceeded from an understanding of hermeneutics which draws mainly on the works of Gadamer and, in particular, Ricœur (see Utsler 2009; Drenthen 2011, 2014; Clingerman 2014). If landscapes and places can be read like texts (see the concept of 'legible landscape' in Drenthen 2011 and 2014 and the meditations of Clingerman 2009 about the 'Book of Nature'), then the act of reading landscape texts could be formative for personal and collective identities. The stories that we tell about the meaning of a place, and what it means to be in that place, not only reflect and support our identity but can also transform it. In this sense, environmental hermeneutics becomes a key to understanding and increasing people's attachment to particular places and landscapes, and also to reinforcing and promoting ethical environmental values and advancements in ecological sustainability, biodiversity and the historical-regional sense of place and identity.

This is why environmental hermeneutics can prove very useful in shedding light on Portugal's dim environmental situation. It is a country faced with many large-scale ecological problems: abandonment of the rural world and agriculture, desertification, unregulated forests, intensive and extensive monoculture of eucalyptus globulus leading to loss of biodiversity, widespread forest fires, landscape decharacterization, river pollution, lack of environmental consciousness, lack of place memory, imagination and identity...

In response to the devastating forest fires of last summer, these environmental issues (especially forest management) became a priority for the Portuguese government, and are now one of the main topics of discussion in Portuguese society, raising many conflicting perspectives and interest.

## **2. Research Plan and methods**

Starting with an environmental hermeneutics-centered reflection on the relationship between place and identity (drawing on the hermeneutic thinking of Ricœur, as well as that of Heidegger, Gadamer, Clingerman, Drenthen, Utsler, Buren, Clayton and Opatow, among others), I want to investigate how landscape alterations in Portugal can affect the sense of space identity among its inhabitants, their attachment to the landscape and their living standards. In the last few decades, Portuguese landscapes have suffered tremendous changes. Abandoned agricultural land and ancient native forests have been largely replaced by vast monocultures of eucalyptus globulus (and also olive trees in the south of Portugal). I want to research how the intensive and extensive monoculture of eucalyptus globulus and its negative impact on biodiversity (Becerra, Catford, Inderjit, et al. 2018), and the destructive and deadly forest fires, along with desertification and land abandonment, are eroding many features of local landscapes and shared reference points, which have helped to support collective and personal identities, and provided human inhabitants with a means of identification and orientation. If the traditional connection between people's sense of identity and place disappears, can this lead to experiences of 'placelessness' (Relph 1976; Augé 1992) and disorientation?

The research plan will be put forth in two phases, utilizing different methods and approaches. The first phase entails explicating and critically reflecting on an emplaced understanding of the environment, and on the concept of environmental identity

developed primarily from the philosophy of Paul Ricœur (cf. Utsler 2014: «Environmental Hermeneutics and Environmental Eco-Psychology: Explorations in Environmental Identity» and Bell 2014: «Environmental Hermeneutics With and For Others: Ricœur's Ethics and the Ecological Self»).

At the same time, I will identify and describe the main issues surrounding the Portuguese environmental situation as specified above, and the different interpretations they have invited. In fact, it is the task of environmental hermeneutics to narrate and mediate the 'conflict of interpretations that exists in our intersubjective encounters with the material, emotional, and intellectual world' (Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen & Utsler 2014: 5; cf. Buren 2014). This reflection will be supported by scientific literature, newspaper articles, social networks and other media, interviews and my own personal experience, and will be framed by the Ricœurian concepts of memory, place, narrative and identity (see Clingerman 2014: «Memory, Imagination, and the Hermeneutics of Place»).

The outcomes of this preliminary reflection will be published in peer-reviewed journals, newspapers and a book issued by Coimbra University Press.

The second phase consists of an interdisciplinary conference dealing with landscape and space identity in Portugal and will provide a platform to explore various approaches towards environmental disciplines in order to provide accounts of the approach of various disciplines to environments. Indeed, 'environmental hermeneutics [...] can be genuinely interdisciplinary in scope' (Clingerman, Treanor, Drenthen & Utsler 2014: 4). Considering different disciplinary interpretations can critically suggest a more robust understanding of the environment. The advantage of an interdisciplinary approach is that it brings together multiple perspectives, engaging a wide variety of scientific disciplines in the same field of enquiry. Humanities and social sciences, biology, geology, forest and botanical sciences, ecology, theology, religious studies, leisure studies and politics, can together provide additional perspectives on environmental hermeneutics. All these areas both contribute to and gain from such dialogue.

Another main goal of this academic event is to work with concrete, historical realities and thus to speak to those same realities and real-world situations. For Gadamer, hermeneutics wholly concerns the real world and is not an abstraction. In this sense, rather than remain at the level of abstract discourse, this academic event intends to engage environmental hermeneutics with both interpretation and practical experience by working with numerous and varied case studies. 'Because hermeneutics [...]

characterizes the being-in-motion of Dasein and is about the entirety of experience in the world, it only makes sense that case studies provide a prime locus for hermeneutical reflection' (Ibid.: 10).

Finally, the outcomes of this conference will be compiled and published. In doing so, I wish to demonstrate that hermeneutics helps to deepen and broaden our moral environmental understanding of the place-based context of a given community, and, in a sense, helps to create a culture of place.

### **3. Expected Outcomes**

The main expected outcomes of this work are:

1) An increased environmental awareness in Portuguese eco-culture, the reinforcement and promotion of ethical environmental values, and advancements in ecological sustainability, biodiversity and the historical-regional culture of place. As stated by Ulster (2014: 140), 'a rightly construed environmental identity on personal and collective levels may be one of many tools employed as a sensible and effective response to the present-day environmental crisis and the debates over how best to address it'.

2) The introduction of the emerging field of environmental hermeneutics in Portuguese eco-culture and academic scholarship, particularly in my 'Hermeneutic Rationality' research and development group (organizational subdivision of my host institution – Center of Classical and Humanistic Studies at the University of Coimbra).

3) The promotion of interdisciplinarity in my place of work (The Portuguese Catholic University of Porto), creating bridges of dialogue between the different scientific disciplines studied and taught in this Institution: theology (the Faculty to which I belong), natural sciences, psychology, arts and humanities, law, economics and monetary sciences. The Portuguese Catholic University of Porto is now developing and executing a very interesting and already award-winning project of reforestation and place restoration, recovering, for example, ancient forests that were replaced by eucalyptus globulus (see <http://www.100milarvores.pt/>).

4) The development of my scientific career and doctoral graduation field, 'Poetics and Hermeneutics'; I have published two books and written several papers concerning the hermeneutic thought of Paul Ricœur. By extending the French philosopher's

hermeneutic thought concerning the environment, I have the opportunity to explore and to further develop his philosophy and broaden the horizons of my previous research.

#### **4. Ethical issues**

There is no ethical issue regarding my research plan or results.

#### **5. Compliance with the Goals of 2030 Agenda**

The research plan complies with the 15<sup>th</sup> goal of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (2030 Agenda).

Environmental hermeneutics is no doubt a form of environmental activism. With this research project I hope to promote ethical environmental values and advancements in ecological sustainability and biodiversity, and advocate concrete change in Portuguese society concerning landscape, desertification, land degradation, forest management and river contamination, explicitly arguing for the integration of a historical-regional sense of place and identity with a biological understanding of processes and ecological diversity-integrity.

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List the *references* cited within the application. 0/3000

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## C.1. Synopsis of the Scientific and Curricular Path

I graduated from the University of Coimbra in 2002 with a degree in Classical and Portuguese Languages and Culture. At the same university I completed a master's degree in Poetics and Hermeneutics funded by the FCT in 2006, my thesis entitled: «Time, Mythos and Praxis: the Dialogue between Ricœur, S. Augustin and Aristotle». I completed a PhD in 2011 in the same research area with further FCT funding, my thesis entitled: *History and Fiction in Paul Ricœur and Thucydides*. Both theses were awarded and published.

In recent years, due to professional reasons, I have focused on two main areas of study: Poetics and Hermeneutics (including Classical Studies) and Portuguese Literature and Culture. In this project I will focus solely Poetics and Hermeneutics, since it is the relevant scientific field.

Between 2011 and 2013, I published several papers and chapters in Portugal, Spain, and Germany concerning «Ekphrasis and Enargeia in the Historiography of Thucydides and in the Philosophical Thought of Paul Ricœur»; the Platonic and Aristotelian concepts of 'mneme' and 'anamnesis', supported by Ricœur's analysis in «Memory, History and Forgetting»; the symbolic and narrative dimensions of myth in Paul Ricœur's thought; and «The Hermeneutics of Historical Discourse in Ricœur's Thought», in which I try to demonstrate how Ricœur establishes a hermeneutics of historical discourse considering the fictional-historical text as paradigm, and hermeneutics as the theoretical-methodological basis for the human sciences.

Between 2013 and 2015, I was a researcher in the International Scientific Project «Poetics of Selfhood: Memory, Imagination and Narrativity». Through two International Conferences, several workshops and other scientific endeavors we sought to explore a wide array of issues related to the narrative construction of meaning and the experience of selfhood understood as the embodied, semiotic, creative process of relationships and identities. Academics in the fields of philosophy, literature, and social sciences were invited to share their perspectives and methods to broaden and deepen this promising realm of study. The results of my research were published in 2016, in a collaborative French publication entitled «Du moi au soi: variations phénoménologiques et herméneutiques» (Presses Universitaires de Rennes). My chapter explored «The fragmented identity of Fernando Pessoa / Bernardo Soares in the light of Paul Ricœur's narrative identity thesis».

In 2016, a volume was published to mark the reception of Paul Ricœur's work in Portugal and especially in the University of Coimbra, entitled «Ricœur at Coimbra. The philosophical reception of this work». I contributed the chapter «Ricœur and the Classics: Time, Narrative and Memory». Finally, in 2017, I published a paper in the international peer-reviewed academic journal *ETUDES RICŒURIENNES / RICŒURIAN STUDIES* (vol 8, n° 1), entitled «History and Truth in Paul Ricœur and Thucydides: Mimesis and Enargeia».

## **C.2. Major Academic Activity and Results**

My participation in the International Scientific Project «Poetics of Selfhood: Memory, Imagination and Narrativity» allowed me to innovatively reflect on the fragmented poetic self in the work of Fernando Pessoa's orthonym, and in the “Book of Disquiet”, narrated by his semi-heteronym Bernardo Soares. This analysis concluded that it is not possible to speak of narrative identity in the poetry of these subjects, and demonstrated the limitations of Ricœur's concept of narrative identity. In 2014 I was invited to publish the preliminary results of this research in Brazil, followed by a final and further developed edition in 2016, in a collaborative French publication featuring world renowned experts in Ricœurian Studies, Phenomenology and Hermeneutics, such as Johann Michel, Claude Romano or Anthony J. Steinbock.

My 2017 paper «History and Truth in Paul Ricœur and Thucydides: Mimesis and Enargeia» was published in the prominent peer-reviewed academic journal *ETUDES RICŒURIENNES / RICŒURIAN STUDIES*, in a number entirely devoted to the historical hermeneutics of the French philosopher. This paper confirms the quality and novelty of my work in this domain. By reflecting on the question of truth and the dialectic between reading and seeing under the guidance of the rhetorical concept of *enargeia*, as well as articulating latent meanings that have remained hidden from scholarly view, I have opened new avenues of interpretation and dialogue between classical and contemporary historiography. Despite the fact that Ricœur's reflections are situated within modern and not ancient historiography (even if the latter sporadically surfaces in his work), I noticed exceptional similarities between the French philosopher's theoretical approach and Athenian historians' application of fiction in history. I further demonstrated that some of the issues at the core of historiography appear in Ricœur's deep meditations on the epistemology and hermeneutics of history.



## D.1. Motivation Letter

The dialogue established between Ricœur and the Greek historian of the 5th century B.C. began life in my PhD research. The outcomes of this research project lead to the 2014 publication of the book-length project «History and Fiction in Ricœur and Thucydides». This book attempts to analyze the *The Peloponnesian War* of Thucydides in light of Ricœur's theses on the epistemology of historical knowledge, in particular the three essential moments of the historiographic operation: documentary evidence; explanation/understanding; writing/representation. This led me to insert the text of Thucydides within the sequence of the three phases of the *mimesis* involved in any narrative: prefiguration, configuration, refiguration. It also allowed me to identify several similarities and differences between the two authors.

Due to the enthusiastic reception of the book in the Lusophone world, especially in Brazil, a second publication was released in 2017, and was produced in a free access digital format by Coimbra University Press.

In 2015, I was invited by the Universities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro to deliver a series of lectures and to collaborate with them to develop a new scientific project uniting Portuguese and Brazilian scholars. As a result of this, the «The Poiesis of Democracy» project was launched in Nov. 2016, seeking to understand the manifold insights and manifestations of democracy in Ancient Greek politics, culture and literature. After two meetings (one in São Paulo and another in Coimbra) held for the purpose of research presentation and critical commentary, we are now preparing a compilation of our research outcomes.

To maintain and strengthen this partnership, we want to develop a new project dealing with «Emplacement and Identity in the Ancient Greek World», which will touch on the field of E. H. expressed in this research proposal.

It is my intention henceforth to extend and apply my knowledge of Hermeneutics to the environment. There are several motivations behind this. First, my preoccupation with the environment; my main concern is creating a balanced relationship between space and identity, and recognizing the importance of landscape and nature in psychological and social wellbeing (Callicott 1999). Second, this extension of Herm. to the environment will represent an innovative approach in Portuguese hermeneutical thought and ecological studies. I aim to incorporate this new exploratory concept of hermeneutical insight into my work at the Fac. of Theology at the UCP-Porto (where I

teach the Phenomenology and Hermeneutics of Religion) and into my research group of 'Hermeneutic Rationality' (attached to the CECH at Un. of Coimbra). Third, this project will promote and enrich interdisciplinarity in institutional partnerships, gathering together several disciplines, along with academic and non-academic institutions, with the shared goal of reflecting on an essential and current issue which concerns all sectors of Portuguese society.

## **E.2. Description of the Host Conditions**

Based at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of Coimbra, the Center of Classical and Humanistic Studies research unit was founded in 1967, and has since established itself as a center of national and international excellence. Advocating interdisciplinarity and scientific divulgation, it created the free online library CLASSICA DIGITALIA to generate a wide communication network devoted to Classical Studies.

The Center has a strong policy of supporting researchers and owns an extensive state-of-the-art library. Despite its traditional and dominant philological matrix, in recent years it has benefitted from interaction with other disciplines such as philosophy, which led to the integration of the Research Group of Hermeneutic Rationality.

## **E.3. Integration into the Host Institution's Strategy**

The proposed research project concerning E. H. fits well into the overall research strategy of the Research Group of Hermeneutic Rationality. Drawing mainly upon the works of Gadamer and Ricoeur, this group is developing their research according to the following thematic areas: Hermeneutics, recognition and memory; Hermeneutics and the city; Hermeneutics and life. Some reflections on the emplaced dimensions of existence, the starting point of E. H, have already been made (see, e.g. the works of L. Umbelino listed in the references). Therefore, it is assumed that my proposed project will open up new avenues of investigation in Hermeneutic Studies, and that my work will contribute to the consolidation of this Research Group inside the Center of Classical and Humanistic Studies.