

Introduction

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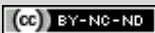
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There is no doubt that for Ricoeur, reading is not an unthought-of act; on the contrary, it is part of his philosophical reflection. Whether it is because he reads the texts of other philosophers, commenting on them extensively, quoting them, or asserting that these texts are fundamental philosophical references to him, whether it is because he quotes, studies or comments on a wide range of extra-philosophical texts, including scientific, logical, linguistic, structuralist or literary-theoretical works, or whether it is because he himself interprets literary works and biblical or theological texts, it is easy to agree that Ricoeur has developed a conscious and intensive reading practice in his writings. The first impression left by his style is that of a thinker who favors dialogue and values intersubjectivity. Better still: could we not say that his need to feed off the texts of others bears witness to an ever-growing demand for himself to invent the creative conceptual means likely to mark his own singularity? What we are saying, in any case, is that for Ricoeur, the activity of reading is much more about sharing his readings with his own readers than about a reductive fidelity to the source text. And to be able to honor the virtue of sharing, we may have to start by avoiding all the traps of authority, especially the one into which a canonical text read by a philosopher too sure of his own reading could lead us. Sharing presupposes address, and address underpins an ethics of reading:

We don't have the right to assert that the *Metaphysical Meditations* are a soliloquy because the person who writes them, and who therefore feels capable of failing, places himself under the gaze of others, whose approval he expects.¹

To be an authority by thwarting the ease of authority through sharing: this could perhaps provide clues to the deeper meaning of Ricoeur's activity of reading.

¹ « Faire intrigue, faire question : sur la littérature et la philosophie », in *Cahiers de l'Herne Ricoeur*, eds. Paul Ricoeur et Bruno Clément (Paris: Éditions de l'Herne, 2004), p. 198.



And yet, however much we may suggest that it is in the name of a certain plurality of truth put into tension by the reading of texts that Ricoeur deploys his own rhetoric—by implementing strategies of appropriation of the texts read, of neutralization of contrary positions, of incorporation of ideas and concepts taken from a varied repertoire, but also by updating the classics—the fact remains that this theme of Ricoeurian reading raises as many questions as it seems to resolve. Acceptance of the plurality of truth, yes, but for what purpose and at what cost? What is this reading ethic based on?

First, we should note that Ricoeur's explicit and dramatized reading sometimes takes on exponential proportions, revealing an exhaustive use of bibliographical reference and quotation that is not without violence towards its potential reader. The latter, in turn, is compelled, in his own work of reading Ricoeur, to make manifest certain procedures presiding over the choices of readings that the philosopher has left in the shadows.

It should also be noted that Ricoeur's actualizing appropriation of the philosophical texts he reads corresponds paradoxically to a concern for preserving the philosophical tradition at a time when its reading is under threat from all sides. On the one hand, the structuralist hegemony seeks to extend its authority beyond linguistics and anthropology, and proposes new ways of reading all texts. On the other, the Heideggerian critique of Western metaphysics provides powerful conceptual tools for re-reading all philosophy. Finally, the Marxist interpretation of the philosophical tradition historicizes truth and, while reading it in a reductive way, intends to force every philosopher of the present to be himself read from his own situation. In his 1961 essay "Histoire de la philosophie et historicité,"² Ricoeur rejects this idea, defining philosophy as a search for truth that lives only by the historical overcoming of its social situation through its works. To be an authority by thwarting the ease of authority through sharing - this, then, is what could perhaps provide clues as to the deeper meaning of Ricoeur's activity of reading.

It is probably fair to say that the problems of reading posed by Ricoeur are those facing the philosophical institution of his time. For even within the philosophical tradition, which paradoxically must be preserved, the spirit of system threatens to reduce the singular truth of a text. This is why, if: "I don't have the right to say that a philosophy is only a moment"³ that has its meaning outside itself in an all-encompassing system is because, without succumbing to the schizophrenia of singularity, "I" must see that each philosopher nevertheless gives a unique form to a universal problem. But just as paradoxically, the spirit of the system threatens the philosophical tradition outside philosophy, as a whole series of gestures of hegemonic appropriation compete with it under the guise of a plurality of discourses on truth. On this point, it could perhaps be said that Ricoeur's difficulty lies in defending a certain classical canon without being content to be a historian of philosophy.

In this sense, even if scientific knowledge and theoretical discourse unquestionably say true things, the ethical challenge for philosophy undoubtedly rests, according to Ricoeur, on a reading capable of bringing ontological truth to life above the scattering of actual history and on the bangs of the spirit of system. Clearly, the duty to read "the unity of truth" in the conflict between contradictory philosophies and the truth of the philosophical problem must take into account the prejudice of philosophical truth, without assuming it in a total reading. This task then

² Paul Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), p. 66–80.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

takes the “gaping tear” as its figure, and the task of transforming the “mortal dilemma into a living paradox,”⁴ of “finding in philosophers something to re-engender metaphysics,” of “revisiting metaphysics that is not closed,” of “reactivating themes that are, if not unused, at least secondary,”⁵ and so on.

In view of the complexity of these threats, which require us to read as philosophers, Ricoeur’s relationship between reading and interpretation becomes clearer. By the time of *The Conflict of Interpretations*, a certain definition of the symbol had made it possible to assign conceptually the place of otherness in relation to the philosophical tradition, and to specify the rules of any interpretation under its control. Moreover, by making the idea of conflict a structural dimension of the reading of philosophers,⁶ Ricoeur reflexively defines his own style of dialogical reading at the junction of the hermeneutics of the recollection of meaning and the hermeneutics of suspicion. Three features stand out: the development of a philosophy radically hostile to any totalizing interpretation of the history of philosophy; a new way of reading certain philosophers, classifying them according to their own way of interpreting; and finally, a recognition of the need to read philosophically texts other than those of the philosophical tradition.

More specifically, with regard to this last trait, it should be emphasized that, according to Ricoeur, it is necessary to assume the circle in which philosophy is engaged: the act of reading, in fact, presupposes a clear delimitation of the disciplinary spheres to which this act applies at the same time as it produces them. We should also point out that, despite this admission of hermeneutic circularity, we are entitled to wonder about Ricoeur’s true relationship with the human sciences, insofar as he situates himself “above them” while at the same time arbitrating between them through his reading.

Be that as it may, if it is incontestable that Ricoeur has constantly reflexively practiced a very particular reading activity, does his ethics of reading provide the means for a complete theory of reading? In *Time and Narrative II*, after having “read” a whole series of theories to which he refuses to grant the gift of reading fictional narratives, Ricoeur goes on to clarify that it is the act of reading that gives ontological consistency to narrative. He then proceeds to offer a kind of proof by deed, through specific readings of three major literary works whose ontological consistency, he believes, depends on the existence of the privileged reading he gives them. We then have to wait until chapter 4 of *Time and Narrative III*⁷ to find what must nonetheless be considered a certain detailed theory of reading, which at this stage only applies to literary works in general.

We are then forced to note a number of theoretical divisions in Ricoeur’s reading: between the assumed activity of reading, on the one hand, and the theoretical justification of reading decisions, on the other. Between the explicitness of a general theory of philosophical reading of

⁴ Paul Ricoeur, « L’Histoire de la philosophie et l’unité du vrai », in Ricoeur, *Histoire et vérité*, p. 45–65.

⁵ « De la volonté à l’acte, un entretien de Paul Ricoeur avec Carlos Oliveira » in « *Temps et récit* » en *débat de Paul Ricoeur en débat*, eds. Christian Bouchindhomme and Rainer Rochlitz (Paris: Cerf, 1990), p. 17–36.

⁶ On rappellera en passant que trois de ses recueils d’articles publiés au Seuil ont précisément pour titre « Lectures » (*Lectures*, vol. 1, 2 et 3).

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, « Monde du texte et monde du lecteur » in *Temps et récit III* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), p. 228–279.

extra-philosophical content, on the one hand, and the absence of a general theory of philosophical reading of a philosophical text, on the other.

Finally, it should be noted that Ricoeur's rhetorical devices both obscure and fictionalize oppositions in the service of a genuine strategy of conflict. Whether by accumulation, reference, omission, amplification or dramatization, Ricoeurian writing sometimes seems to hide as much as it reveals the weight of the readings that make it up, which form a complex network where explicitness mingles with the implicit. The task of the Ricoeurian reader is therefore anything but simple, since we who wish to read him must accept his conception of sharing without conceding anything to the ease of his authority.

Bibliography

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