

## The Act of Reading in Paul Ricoeur's Philosophy

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### Abstract

In this paper the author considers the problem of the act of reading in Paul Ricoeur's philosophy. Distinguishing between the methodological level and the speculative level of this problem, it first discusses the method and style of Ricoeur's philosophising. This can be summarised through the frame of a critical hermeneutics and, subsequently, of the philosophical fulcrum, centred on the hermeneutic-anthropological dimension and on the concept of narrative identity. The main thesis is that the ultimate justification of Ricoeur's literary choices and his way of approaching texts and the act of reading are justified by his specific vision of the human being. Philosophical hermeneutics can lead to profile and deepen this vision.

**Keywords:** *Reading, non-philosophical, critical hermeneutics, narrative identity*

### Résumé

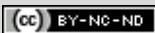
Dans cet article, l'auteur examine la problématique de l'acte de lecture dans la philosophie de Paul Ricoeur. Distinguant les niveaux méthodologique et spéculatif de cette problématique, il développe une analyse de la méthode et du style philosophique de Ricoeur. Ces derniers renvoient pour l'essentiel à un concept d'herméneutique critique ainsi qu'à un noyau philosophique, centré sur la dimension herméneutico-anthropologique et sur le concept d'identité narrative. La thèse principale est que la justification ultime des choix littéraires et de la manière ricœurienne d'aborder les textes et la lecture trouve sa justification dans la vision spécifique de l'homme que l'herméneutique philosophique conduit à esquisser et à approfondir.

**Mots-clés :** *lire, non philosophique, herméneutique critique, identité narrative*

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# The Act of Reading in Paul Ricoeur's Philosophy

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Für ihn [Dilthey] ist Bedeutung nicht ein logischer Begriff, sondern wird als Ausdruck des *Lebens* verstanden. Das Leben selbst, diese fließende Zeitlichkeit, ist auf die Herausgestaltung von bleibenden Bedeutungseinheiten angelegt. Das Leben selbst legt sich aus. Er hat selbst hermeneutische Struktur<sup>1</sup>.

Que saurions-nous de l'amour et de la haine, des sentiments éthiques et, en général, de tout ce que nous appelons le *soi*, si cela n'avait été porté au langage et articulé par la littérature ?<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

There is no doubt that the practice of reading played a central role in Ricoeur's research journey. Reading also characterises his work from a strictly speculative point of view, first of all, for that vision and logic of a hermeneutics of the "long way" (*voie longue*) that lies between the ontology of understanding (in the Heideggerian sense) and the epistemology of interpretation.

The latter—in accordance with Gadamer's lesson (to which Ricoeur looks) and the hermeneutic tradition—is understood, in the main, as the interpretation of texts. To be more precise, it expresses the "short way" (*voie courte*) of intuition (as understood in *Sein und Zeit* [1927], based on the principle that the structure of meaning is rooted in the existential constitution of the Being in the interpretive understanding [§ 32]). Ricoeur proposes the long way of an interpretation applied to signs, symbols and texts as mediating elements in our relationship with the world. This long way does not reject the idea of the rooting of meaning on being; on the contrary, it can be recognised that Ricoeur's ultimate intention is to grasp the ontological value of a text, myth or cultural phenomenon. However, the answer to the question of the meaning of being conveyed by text, myth or cultural phenomenon can never be direct or immediate. Conflicts between different methods and styles of interpretation are indeed inevitable.<sup>3</sup> This explains the necessity or inevitability of the long way.

Precisely because of his reflection on Heidegger's work, for Ricoeur this relationship of mediation takes on a fundamental importance in the acquisition of self-knowledge. Heidegger offers a definition of a hermeneutics that questions the human being while emphasising the ontological question of being. He repropose the centrality of the subject of a quasi-Cartesian sense: there is no apodictic certainty, so although meaning and authenticity are lost, what remains is the primacy of questioning such that the being of Dasein belongs the understanding of being (*Zum Sein des Daseins gehört Seinsverständnis*, § 18), i.e. access to Being occurs through a *cogitans* subject.

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<sup>1</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, Mohr, 1986), 230.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action* (Paris, Seuil 1986), 116.

<sup>3</sup> Domenico Jervolino, *Il cogito e l'ermeneutica* (Genova: Marietti, 1993), 82.

It is from here that the ontological problem and the ontic problem are closely linked, as is reflected in the link between the question of the understanding of being and the determination of Dasein's sense of being<sup>4</sup>. This is a perspective that Ricoeur himself embraces. It is true that in his research ontology remains in the background as the ultimate reference and "promised land"<sup>5</sup> of a hermeneutics of the long way. However, the sense of the interpretation of texts is not only linked to the discourse of self-understanding of a cultural–historical subject, but rather to the recognition (with Heidegger) that between being and language there is a distance or fracture to be bridged. In his writings, Ricoeur fully justifies why this distance or fracture must be bridged through the long way, not the short way, of interpretation: the lesson of the "masters of suspicion," Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, made it clear that the way of direct access to being through the *Cogito* is barred. If "the philosopher trained in the school of Descartes knows that things are doubtful... but he does not doubt that consciousness is such as it appears to itself," since the masters of suspicion "this too has become doubtful"<sup>6</sup>. Equally justified is the fact that for Ricoeur, unlike Heidegger, the hermeneutic excavation does not take the path of overcoming inauthenticity and unveiling being, but that of the conflict and war of interpretations. Domenico Jervolino effectively sums up Ricoeur's position on this characterising aspect:

[...] the domain of interpretation is not the serene land in which meaning is bestowed, but the rough and violent land in which meaning is called into question, apparent certainties are challenged, illusions unmasked, and rival hermeneutics confront each other in an endless struggle. Ricoeur's hermeneutics is characterised by the theme of the "conflict" of interpretations, by its specific "tension" between different and opposing interpretative styles: hermeneutics as the exercise of "suspicion" and hermeneutics as the mediation of "meaning." This happens because the conception of the "subject" on interpretation is already conflicting and "tense:" it is a tense, restless, and dual subject that has to lose itself in order to find itself again, that has to come out of itself, to open up to the other, and yet is always tempted to close in on itself, to proclaim itself self-sufficient. It is a will that, on the one hand, is called upon to take on an involuntary within itself, to make it its own, to recognise itself as finite freedom, but which is, on the other hand, always threatened by the "vanity" of the "passion," always threatened to founder in the face of an involuntary understood as absolute impossibility, as "ontological" rejection and despair.<sup>7</sup>

In short, Ricoeur's philosophy is not characterised by linearity, nor by a peaceful or consensual character: it is not a "happy ending" philosophy. Uncertainty, conflict and dissent dominate.<sup>8</sup> Taking into account the fact that this vision constitutes the speculative characterisation of Ricoeur's position, it is completely inappropriate to seek a strictly rational, analytical and methodologically guided linearity in his hermeneutics. This would be equivalent to emptying his

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, trans. D. Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974) 24.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. D. Savage (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 33

<sup>7</sup> Jervolino, *Il cogito e l'ermeneutica*, 15–16; trans. by the author.

<sup>8</sup> François Dosse, in "L'effet Ricoeur dans les sciences humaines," Luc Boltanski, François Dosse, Michaël Föessel et al., *Esprit*, 323 (mars-avril 2006), 52.

philosophy of the true speculative substance that characterises it. This philosophy revolves around the questioning of human beings in their constitution, in their meaning (and search for meaning), in their historicity and in their reality. It follows a trend that is not purely analytical, but *reflective*, *descriptive*, and *interpretative* according to that triple matrix which, as will be discussed later, derives from the traditions to which Ricoeur is linked.

It is in reference to this that the topic of reading practice in Ricoeur must be addressed. This topic is made complex not only by the speculative framework just outlined — a framework that constitutes the foundation of Ricoeur's philosophical hermeneutics — but also by the fact that it can and must be understood and analysed on multiple levels. In fact, it is one thing to ask the question of Ricoeur as a reader of (philosophical and non-philosophical) texts, and thus the question of what his criterion of choice and his reading technique or procedure is; it is another to consider the meaning or function and interpretation of reading (i.e. of the act of reading) from the point of view of his philosophy. Although these two cases may have a certain degree of correlation, they neither overlap nor mix. In the first case, the dilemma of the method and style of Ricoeur's philosophical work dominates, but it is still necessary to clarify whether we intend to treat Ricoeur as a "scholar" of philosophical texts and reader of non-philosophical texts or as a "philosopher" who works with philosophical and non-philosophical texts. Clearly, of the two paths it is the second which has greater significance given that Ricoeur's relationship, for example, with texts of the history of philosophy is not dictated by his being a specialist or historian of philosophy, but by his being a philosopher according to a modality (a continental and hermeneutic-philosophical one) that refers to the philosophical tradition in a specific way. In the second case, the dilemma of speculative content dominates, namely, what is the "philosophy of the act of reading" developed by Ricoeur? These are two very different dilemmas which nonetheless can be treated in parallel — I shall attempt to do so in this article.

## Ricoeur Reader of Philosophical and Non-philosophical Texts

### Between Reflection, Description and Interpretation

Several scholars think that, taken as a whole, Ricoeur's philosophical work presents the configuration of a true history of philosophy.<sup>9</sup> However several aspects limit the validity of this interpretation: first of all, as already mentioned, Ricoeur does not work as a historian of philosophy but as a philosopher, therefore what he creates is not a history of philosophy but a *new* philosophy; secondly, although I have previously identified the questioning of the human being as the heart of Ricoeur's hermeneutics, this does not mean that it takes the form of a unitary, systematic and concluded vision of the whole. In fact, not only has Ricoeur on several occasions underlined that we belong to a post-Hegelian era of philosophising, explicitly linking his own research to it,<sup>10</sup> he has acknowledged that his philosophy seems to him to be characterised more by the diversity of

<sup>9</sup> E.g., Jeffry W. van den Hengel, *The Home of Meaning. The Hermeneutics of the Subject of Paul Ricoeur* (Washington: University Press of America, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Autocompreensión e historia," in *Paul Ricoeur: Los caminos de la interpretación*, eds. Tomás Calvo Martínez, Remedios Avila Crespo (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1991), 23–30.

the themes addressed than by unity.<sup>11</sup> Of course, it is more than possible to identify general traits — indeed, here lies one of the fundamental differences between Ricoeur himself and numerous readers and interpreters, who have instead identified elements of unity. But it is necessary to take into account Ricoeur's own indication, since it reflects not only recognition of the post-Hegelian era of philosophising but also adherence to an idea of problematic, "wounded" (*blessé*), open and free philosophising. In this sense, Ricoeur and his philosophy reject methodologism or methodological rigorism. In this respect, his words in the Preface to *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2000) are emblematic:

I frequently mention and quote authors belonging to different epochs, but I do not present a history of the problem. I summon this or that author according to the requirements of the argument, without concerning myself with the epoch. This seems to me to be the right of every reader, before whom all the books are open simultaneously<sup>12</sup>.

This does not mean that Ricoeur's philosophising is methodologically weak or that it does not respond to any method, criterion or logic. The "open" character of his philosophising does not translate into vagueness or wandering of thought; similarly, the vastness and variety of his readings and thematic itineraries of investigation does not open the door to the eclecticism of thought, still less to an epistemic relativism.

We are faced with a thinker who, time after time, carefully and rigorously follows his argumentative and counter-argumentative itinerary, carefully taking into account the tradition, the interlocutor and that philosopher's discursive logic. Furthermore, from the body of his research we can trace the profile of a modality and style of philosophical thought and procedure that allows the unfolding of the speculative itinerary of the long path of philosophical hermeneutics. Investigating this last aspect helps us to better understand the way and meaning of Ricoeur's relationship with both philosophical and non-philosophical texts, and therefore to better understand the way and meaning of his approach to reading.

It was Ricoeur himself who methodologically defined his vast and varied philosophical work as a "*reflexive* philosophy" that remains within the "sphere of [...] *phenomenology*" as its "*hermeneutical variation*."<sup>13</sup> It is true that this definition appeared when he had reached a mature age and that, in his earlier years, his research presented aspects close to the traditions of spiritualism, philosophies of existence and phenomenology; however these are not later denied but rather absorbed into this triple formula. This indicates both the major traditions of reference in Ricoeur's thought and the main features of his philosophising, that is, the features of a procedure of "interpretative description with a reflective basis." The fact that reflective thought forms the basis of his *modus philosophandi* is not of secondary importance. This reflective philosophy is placed within a tradition that places the subject at the centre in the Cartesian sense, and which, following Kant's perspective, leads to Jean Nabert, one of the thinkers of greatest influence for Ricoeur.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Lectio Magistralis (Barcelone, 24 avril 2001)," in *Une herméneutique de la condition humaine*, ed. Domenico Jervolino (Paris: Ellipses, 2002), 80.

<sup>12</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), xvii.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays on Hermeneutics II*, trans. K. Blamey, J. B. Thompson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 12.

Undoubtedly, understanding the self as a subject stretched between freedom and necessity, between action and responsibility, occupies considerable space in Ricoeur's research, on different levels of analysis: theoretical, anthropological, existential, and ethical. Reflection is the act of returning to oneself whereby a subject finds, in intellectual clarity and moral responsibility, the unifying principle of the questions within which it disperses and forgets him/herself as a subject. With respect to this reflective philosophy (Husserl's) phenomenology would at first seem to express only the character of a simple *mouvance*, whereas hermeneutics would play the limited role of a variant of this phenomenology.<sup>14</sup>

However, Ricoeur himself explains the broad effect of the combination of phenomenology and hermeneutics with reflective philosophy. The former brings about a realisation (*réalisation*) and, at the same time, a radical transformation of the program of reflective philosophy itself (*une transformation radicale du programme même de la philosophie réflexive*)<sup>15</sup>, to the extent that Husserl's discourse looks idealistically at the radical self-foundation of the subject via intellectual means. Hermeneutics do the same to an even greater extent, which determines a subversion (*subversion*) of phenomenology and opens the path of reflection in a new, different way and, therefore, to the practical-existential dimension. Already in *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (1965), Ricoeur's first book on hermeneutics, the reflection becomes "the appropriation of our effort to exist and of our desire to be, through the works which bear witness to that effort and desire"<sup>16</sup>. As regards the impact of hermeneutics on phenomenology, the reduction is no longer given as a primary philosophical gesture: the split from the background of existence in which consciousness is, for Husserl, originally immersed is transformed into a derivative operation of distancing. Such distancing not only brings primary objectivation and scientific objectivation onto the same plane, but also presupposes a participatory belonging to the world, that is, a relationship that already possesses a rootedness of meaning. After the discovery of the unconscious, hermeneutics constitute the only "reparative" response to the impracticability of phenomenological reduction as a philosophical gesture capable of revealing in an immediate and full way the sense of our intentional relationship with ourselves, with others and with the world.

It is undeniable that Ricoeur remained faithful to this reflective, phenomenological and hermeneutic framing of his philosophising. And yet, several factors—such as (1) the epistemological model developed through theories of text, action and history, on the one hand, and the philosophy of psychoanalysis on the other—a model known as the "hermeneutic arc"; (2) a widespread philosophical practice with an interdisciplinary character; and (3) an active and emancipatory commitment—suggest an approach to philosophising in which the exercise of hermeneutics and, more precisely, of *critical hermeneutics* dominates.

### Critical Hermeneutics

Critical hermeneutics refers to a kind of philosophical project connected with the debate between Habermas and Gadamer in the 1970s (i.e. *critique of ideology* vs. *hermeneutics of tradition*) into which Paul Ricoeur inserted himself with a contribution titled *Herméneutique et critique des idéologies* (1973), later collected in *From Text to Action* (1986). In it, Ricoeur uses the notion of "herméneutique critique" to characterise his position of tensional mediation between Gadamer's

<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 25–26.

<sup>16</sup> Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 46; italics of the author.



perspective on the hermeneutics of tradition and Habermas's perspective on the critique of ideology. Several aspects of this operation carried out by Ricoeur, clearly visible in the article, show a deeper connection with the general Ricoeurian *modus operandi*, beyond the specific Gadamer/Habermas *querelle*:

1. the connection between critical hermeneutics and the epistemology of the hermeneutic arc. The latter is a conception built on the hermeneutic phenomenology of text, action and history, which gives critical hermeneutics a transversal epistemological structure, already interdisciplinary, arranged between explication and understanding. The hermeneutic reference remains central, as Ricoeur conceives explication and understanding as relative moments internal to the more complex and general process of interpretation. This idea is magnificently summarised in the motto *expliquer plus pour comprendre mieux*, from which Ricoeur's dream of a futuristic unification of knowledge seems to shine through.
2. the connection of critical hermeneutics to Freud's psychoanalysis, the reinterpretation of which not only generates the first source of problematisation for Ricoeur's theory of the hermeneutic arc as well as characterises and influences his *parcours* from side to side, but above all it reveals its profound interdisciplinary configuration.

In his *Intellectual Autobiography* (1995) Ricoeur firmly states his unwavering position that philosophy dies if its thousand-year dialogue with the sciences is interrupted, be the mathematical sciences, natural sciences or human sciences<sup>17</sup>. However, regarding his theory of the hermeneutic arc, by examining his copious production and defining the very general characteristics of his procedure, we can see that Ricoeur developed his research in accordance with this dialogical orientation/characterisation of philosophy by building a well-defined (and *avant-garde*) model of interdisciplinary philosophy on it.

On various occasions, Ricoeur states that he was more struck by the fragmentary, thematic and rhapsodic speculative nature of his research (despite the rigor of the method and the process of analysis, argumentation and interpretation) than by its coordinated, synthetic and systematic character. He defines it as a sort of "controlled schizophrenia." However, at the same time, it can be said to be unitary or (perhaps better) unified/unifiable. Ricoeur himself demonstrated this with *Oneself as Another* (1990).

Embraced as a(n interdisciplinary) whole, the methodological model of critical hermeneutics emerges as a complete procedural process capable of operating with a certain degree of coherence, coordination and efficacy/legitimacy between (a) scientific and non-scientific knowledge and (b) fragmented models, theories and discursive registers resistant to any synthesis, in need of a highly flexible and transversal approach, and capable of governing tensions.

The methodological characteristics of this critical hermeneutics are defined by considering the more general traits, factors and characteristics of Ricoeur's work. These elements can be summarised as follows:

- the ideal of research work and dialogue within the philosophical community;
- 3. a speculative procedure according to which "all books are open simultaneously" to the scholar and the philosopher;

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Réflexion faite. Autobiographie intellectuelle* (Paris: Éditions Esprit, 1995), 62.

4. interdisciplinary work;
5. a focus on "philosophical argumentation;"
6. the reflective–hermeneutic dynamism between the non-philosophical dimension and the philosophical dimension;
7. research in connection with analytic philosophy;
8. philosophical engagement on lived reality and in relation to the political and social;
9. disposition/placement of philosophy in the theory/practice dialectic; and
10. articulation/differentiation of the philosophical procedure by reflective degrees and by thematic and philosophical–methodological registers.

In specific reference to the question of "Ricoeur the reader," the various aspects that characterise his philosophical hermeneutics help us better understand the mobile and tensional character of his relationship with philosophers and philosophical texts. But they also help clarify the difference with respect to his relationship with non-philosophical texts. On the one hand, this relationship is fully justified based on the interdisciplinary character of Ricoeur's work and the idea that today philosophy is destined to die if it interrupts its relationship of dialogue and reflection with science and knowledge. On the other hand, it is not an equal relationship, as is clearly highlighted by the discussion underlying the transition from non- or pre-philosophical to philosophical.

#### From Non-Philosophical/Pre-Philosophical to Philosophical

Much of Ricoeur's thought is non- and pre-philosophical. In the essay *Filosofia e interpretazione* (1969) Francesca Brezzi explains this clearly:

Ricoeur [...] maintains that philosophy is not a creation *ex nihilo*, but always has non-philosophical presuppositions, of the "already there." Therefore philosophical discourse always begins with the other than itself, from a nebulous but rich matrix, proposing to explicate and clarify what has been said in an immediate and enigmatic way. This primary material, however, does not simply and immediately pass into speculative (philosophical) discourse, nor is subjected to critical analysis, to reflection, and this is precisely what the philosophical act consists of: philosophy is born in a critical interval after an initial mute vision. It is thus a response, through various and further moments, of the non-philosophical material, which thus comes to constitute its source and allows its autonomy. [...] He accepts the impossibility of philosophical discourse to have a radical starting point, as a discourse of pure reason. If philosophy did not have presuppositions it would be an illusory search, in the vain attempt to find a first truth. On the other hand, Ricoeur is also aware that pre-philosophical material and subsequent elaboration are not sufficient to determine philosophical material and subsequent elaboration are not sufficient to determine the philosophical discourse, i.e. a problematic discourse. In fact, the passage from the inexpressible to the expressible, from the exceptional experience to the universal experience



must take place as a questioning, as a recovery and a restart, that is, as a creative and significant re-elaboration, of a critical and methodological nature at the same time.<sup>18</sup>

First, the non-philosophical or pre-philosophical constitutes the fertile humus of the pre-philosophical questioning of meaning that proceeds from the internal symbolic earth. Here philosophy essentially listens to the spiritual and the religious. Gabriel Marcel's thought, which identified the dimension of the interior-transcendent with "mystery" (*mystère*), acts as a fundamental reference for Ricoeur, who tends to investigate by linking *philosophie réflexive* to symbolic hermeneutics, starting from the *empirique* of *Finitude and Culpability* (1960). "Le symbole donne à penser" is the famous formula by which he summarises this work of speculative thought on the mythical (ergo, on the literary) and on the symbolic. By virtue of the theme in question — culpability, the study of which requires a speculative passage for the productions of the confession made by the religious conscience in tradition —, Ricoeur investigates the symbolic of the three genres of cosmic, oneiric and poetic productions. Nonetheless, he maintains the axis of interior-transcendent, remaining faithful to Marcel's thought but also linking it to Freud's psychoanalytic lessons on psychic life.<sup>19</sup> In the *Philosophie de la volonté*, the thematic space and philosophical possibility of a poetics remain open. After the phenomenology and empirics of the will, his *poétique de la volonté* completed the trilogy of the *Philosophie de la volonté*. The project was not realised, but neither was it lost in the vicissitudes of the *tournant herméneutique*; indeed, its integration into this later turn enriched it overall by extending it into more works. In fact, the traces of poetics can be found in his works in subsequent years, in areas ranging from the philosophy of language to narrative hermeneutics, from biblical hermeneutics to philosophical anthropology.<sup>20</sup> The last of these, philosophical anthropology, finds its broadest development in *Oneself as Another*, the true philosophical summa of Ricoeur's long research journey.

Secondly, the non-philosophical or pre-philosophical forms the immediate givenness of a social or political fact that occurs in the context of current events and which calls the philosopher to reflection and to public discussion. This is the aspect of philosophising as an intellectual commitment of the philosopher, an aspect that Ricoeur — militant since he was young under various political-religious movements — brings to maturity under the influence of Emmanuel Mounier and the journal *Esprit*.<sup>21</sup> It is his book *Histoire et vérité* (1955) that most effectively represents this aspect of engaged philosophising.<sup>22</sup> In it, predominantly but not

<sup>18</sup> Francesca Brezzi, *Filosofia e interpretazione* (Bologna: Il mulino, 1969), 13–14; trans. by the author.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Finitude et culpabilité*, vol. II: *La symbolique du mal* (Paris: Aubier, 1960), 16 and 20.

<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur, *Réflexion faite*, 26.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> We can make reference to what Ricoeur declares in the preface to the first edition of this book: "Je crois à l'efficacité de la réflexion, parce que je crois que la grandeur de l'homme est dans la dialectique du travail et de la parole ; le dire et le faire, le signifier et l'agir sont trop mêlés pour qu'une opposition durable et profonde puisse être instituée entre "théoria" et "praxis". La parole est mon royaume et je n'en ai point honte ; ou plutôt j'en ai honte dans la mesure où ma parole participe de la culpabilité d'une société injuste qui exploite le travail ; je n'en ai point honte originellement, je veux dire par égard pour sa destination. Comme universitaire, je crois à l'efficacité de la parole enseignante; comme enseignant l'histoire de la philosophie, je crois à la puissance éclairante, même pour une politique, d'une parole consacrée à élaborer notre mémoire philosophique ; comme membre de l'équipe *Esprit*, je

exclusively, the “pre-philosophical material is clearly defined as religious faith, which begins the reflection and ends it.”<sup>23</sup> In Ricoeur's maturity, the idea of *engagement philosophique* is transformed by following a direction in which the instance of the religious discourse tends to take place in the background, and a thought that is exercised “autour du politique” dominates, but remains focused on the social and ethical–practical dimension (see, e.g. *The Just* 1 [1995] and 2 [2001])<sup>24</sup>.

Thirdly, the non- or pre-philosophical represents in Ricoeur the borderlands of culture, mainly symbolic–mythical and literary (where hermeneutics is exercised). It is the collection *Lectures* 3 (1994) that explicitly takes us to this new side. On the one hand, “aux frontières de la philosophie” is the formula chosen to bring together essays mainly on philosophy of religion and biblical hermeneutics. On the other hand, we find contributions that favour grafting onto the theological–religious axis the poetics and the literary according to a broader formula. The concept of poetics matures in Ricoeur along a reflective line dominated by the anthropological–philosophical question. It is very significant, in this regard, what we find in the text dedicated to the interpretation of Rembrandt's painting “Aristotle with a Bust of Homer” (1653), collected in the volume *L'unique et le singulier* (1999). In his commentary, Ricoeur clearly defines the (hermeneutic) space of intersection of the poetic in the philosophical:

We began with the problem of hermeneutics, defining it as a continual interpretation of texts. Poetic texts certainly have a pre-eminent place, a royal place among texts, because they are the texts that produce meaning. I extend the word poetic beyond poetry in the rhyming, rhythmic sense, to the sense of producing meaning. In other words, there has to be a creative energy of innovation before there can be a second-degree discourse. I would not put philosophy in the place of poetics: it is reflective. It is always a second-degree work, moreover, not just on poetry, but also on ordinary language, on the language of science, on the language of psychoanalysis and poetic discourse.<sup>25</sup>

Fourthly, the non- or pre-philosophical leads to the field of interdisciplinary work, especially the relationship between philosophy and the human and social sciences. This characterisation of the “doing of philosophy” is widespread in Ricoeur and can be found in all his major works, even as early 1950, with his book *Freedom and Nature*. Here, the confrontation with empirical psychology and psychoanalysis is not resolved in a critique of the unconscious or some kind of subjugation of psychology to phenomenology: rather, Ricoeur outlines the need for an equal interdisciplinary relationship in which psychology performs an indicative–diagnostic function for phenomenology. We also find something comparable in his 1965 essay devoted to psychoanalysis and the subject of interpretation, *Freud and Philosophy*. This work, in fact, does not exclusively outline a philosophy of psychoanalysis; rather, it is articulated in an “Analytic” and

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*crois à l'efficacité de la parole qui reprend réflexivement les thèmes générateurs d'une civilisation en marche; comme auditeur de la prédication chrétienne, je crois que la parole peut changer le “cœur”, c'est-à-dire le centre jaillissant de nos préférences et de nos prises de position. En un sens, tous ces essais sont à la gloire de la parole qui réfléchit efficacement et qui agit pensivement”, Paul Ricoeur, Histoire et vérité (Paris: Seuil, 1967), 9.*

<sup>23</sup> Brezzi, *Filosofia e interpretazione*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> Vinicio Busacchi, *Pour une herméneutique critique* (Paris: Harmattan, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *L'unique et le singulier* (Paris: Alice Éditions, 1999), 52–60, part. re-ed. in *L'homme capable. Autour de Paul Ricoeur* (Paris: PUF, 2006), 6–8, 7–8; trans. by the author.

“Dialectic” of Freud, that is, in a “reading” of Freud which has the character of a critical analysis on a theoretical basis, and in an “interpretation” of Freud which has the character of a speculative critical examination. The confrontation with psychoanalysis famously continues in *The Conflict of Interpretations* (1969), which is also the terrain of confrontation with linguistics and structuralism. This was followed by *The Rule of Metaphor* (1975), which is articulated between semantics, rhetoric and hermeneutics and is closely connected with the trilogy of *Time and Narrative* (1983–1985), another work which reveals the full breadth and importance of scientific resources (especially narrative theory and history) placed at the service of philosophical research. The ripest fruit, as mentioned above, is gathered in *Oneself as Another*. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, the interdisciplinary confrontation is doubled: on the psychological side, in the presence of the cognitive approach in the study of memory, again alongside the support of psychoanalysis; and (above all) on the side of history, with extensive exploration of historiographical literature.

Fifthly, and finally, the non- or pre-philosophical has to do with the question of the starting point of philosophising. This is an aspect to which Ricoeur devotes attention, already concentrating on it in his early research. As early as 1960, with *Fallible Man*, he was arguing that the idea of the philosophical method in philosophy must be completely dissociated from that of the starting point. Philosophy does not give rise to any absolute beginning: carried by non-philosophy, it essentially lives from a reality which has already been understood, albeit not yet through reflection. But if philosophy is not a radical beginning as far as origins are concerned, it can be such a starting point for method.<sup>26</sup> In short, the philosopher’s beginning is the ordering or choice (according to criteria and internal logic) of a path or procedure of examination, elucidation and critical treatment.

### Which “Logics” Behind Textual Choices

In light of what has been discussed above, it seems quite clear that the logic and justification of Ricoeur’s textual choices and textual operations made cannot be sought in the terrain of the discipline to which a given text pertains. Ricoeur works as a philosopher; he brings texts, themes and problems into the field of the philosophical. He does not simply analyse and discuss them according to the argumentative logic and needs of this field but draws inspiration from them with a view to both deepening understanding and speculative advancement: the whole meaning of the transition from the non- or pre-philosophical to the philosophical lies here.

The difference between the act of reading the non-/pre-philosophical text and the act of reading the philosophical text appears well defined and justified on several levels. First, the antecedence of the non-/pre-philosophical over the philosophical indicates as much the pre-eminence of the former over the latter (at the initial stage of speculative research) as a difference in a variety of fields and disciplinary references. As noted above, the non-/pre-philosophical potentially covers every field *other* than the philosophical. It should be emphasised, however, that Ricoeur — with his philosophical construction centred on a hermeneutically anchored philosophy of the human being — looks with prevalent interest in the field of the symbolic, mythical and literary. The numerous passages from hierophanies to oneiric and poetic productions, from myths to Greek tragedians, from the Bible to the Torah, from Shakespeare to Proust, from Musil to Kundera, etc., testify to the importance of literature in his work. This centrality finds confirmation in the more mature developments of his research (as will be seen in the next paragraph), particularly with his philosophy of narrative identity. The following statement appears emblematic

<sup>26</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Finitude et culpabilité*, vol. I: *L’Homme faillible* (Paris: Aubier, 1960), 25.

in this regard: "What would we know of love and hate, of moral feelings and, in general, of all that we call the self, if these had not been brought to language and articulated by literature?"<sup>27</sup> For Ricoeur, then, the most original level of self-understanding and self-knowledge passes through the literary work. He essentially derives the antecedence and pre-eminence of the act of reading the literary text over the philosophical text. It is with reference to this discourse that we can introduce, secondly, the difference in the specific *quality* of self-understanding. If, on the one hand, philosophical reflection makes it explicit, articulates it, and deepens it, it is, on the other hand, the reading of the literary text, within the imaginative and reflexive game, that concurs to configure and structure the self. The reading of the literary text imposes a fictive existential suspension in the same sense as the fictional suspension that the text conveys. Fiction is a fundamental dimension as much in the text as in the subjectivity of the reader, so reading introduces me into the imaginative variations of the ego. The metamorphosis of the world, according to the game of reading, also becomes the playful metamorphosis of the ego. This is a metamorphosis, as Ricoeur explains, that involves a moment of distancing from the self, a moment that opens to the dialectic of distanciation and appropriation and a possible new understanding of emancipatory value<sup>28</sup>.

Beyond the specific discussion of the dialectic with the non- or pre-philosophical in Ricoeur, the aspect of disciplinary self-reference in the treatment of extradisciplinary themes and problems is valid as a general criterion with respect to every scientific work. Experts in individual disciplines carry out their work on the basis of a self-founded and self-justified criteriology; this is something that both distinguishes each discipline and places them in a "dialectical" relationship without denying space for proximity, or even for intertwining and interdisciplinary contamination—as is the case, for example, of the dialectic between historiography and philosophy of history, between political philosophy and political theory or between narrative hermeneutics and narratology or narrative theory. In this last regard, in the case of Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*, we can point out that it does not express a narrative theory in an absolute sense but a narrative theory on a philosophical basis, i.e. with a speculative foundation. Its ultimate logic does not follow the scientific rigor of technical procedures which generate modelling in an analytical classificatory comparative and systematic way; rather, it is based on and aims at speculative in-depth analysis. But an "in-depth" analysis of what? An in-depth study of the human field, or—as mentioned in the beginning—a better and deeper understanding of the human being, human cultural productions, the human condition and human reality. It is certainly no coincidence that, in the general conclusions of *Time and Narrative* vol. 3, Ricoeur comes to grasp in an unprecedented way a new aspect of human reality that of the narrative dimension of identity. The philosophical concept of "narrative identity" (*identité narrative*), elaborated by the complex reflective and interdisciplinary work developed in *Time and Narrative*, becomes key not only to resolving the serious and urgent controversy of the nature of human personal identity (whether fictitious or, in some way, substantial) but also to outlining a new philosophy of the human being. This represents an important step forward, if not also fulfilment, of the vast research itinerary opened by the long way of hermeneutics.

It is on this level, of philosophical anthropology, that we find the second ground to cover in order to understand Ricoeur's philosophy of the act of reading. We are thus pushed back from

<sup>27</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Hermeneutical Function of Distantiation," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 105.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

the level of the method and style of philosophising to the level of philosophical conception or philosophical outcomes.

## The Anthropological Basis Behind the “World of the Text”

As anticipated at the beginning, the dilemma of how to define Ricoeur’s “philosophy of the act of reading” is closely linked to the philosophical conception that constitutes the heart of his research. Beyond the open, broad and unsystematic character of this philosophy, we have identified its “gravitational centre” in the reflection on human nature and human reality.

On the one hand, we can confirm this by leveraging his 1990 book prompted by the Gifford Lectures four years earlier, in which Ricoeur was asked to summarise and retrace forty years of his speculative research. The book unfolds in ten studies placed precisely at the centre a “hermeneutic phenomenology of the self.” It is here that Ricoeur elaborates his philosophy of the capable human being (*homme capable*). On the other hand, we can affirm this in light of what we saw at the beginning when dealing with the essential character of this hermeneutics of the long way. It is rooted in the idea of a reflective and interpretative understanding of the subject through texts and works disseminated throughout the long cultural history of the human being. Textual hermeneutics is not an end in itself: it has to do with the reality of the subject and his/her emancipatory challenges, because there is no self-understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols and texts. This is a point of view that Ricoeur finds in Gadamer, which Gadamer himself takes from Dilthey<sup>29</sup> (over and above the distance between the two, and however much the Gadamerian perspective stands in open antithesis to that of Dilthey). As *Truth and Method* states:

For him [Dilthey] significance is not a logical concept, but is to be understood as an expression of *life*. Life itself, flowing temporality, is ordered toward the formation of enduring units of significance. Life interprets itself. Life itself has a hermeneutical structure.<sup>30</sup>

Here we find a conception that places the psychological dimension in a dialectic with the historical-cultural dimension of the interpretative movement rooted in life. This is because, although human life in itself possesses a hermeneutic structure, the movement of understanding can only occur thorough the mediation of language or of those signs, symbols and texts that are culturally transmitted, and which express and reflect the historical-cultural dimension of human life. We are natural beings as much as we are cultural beings.

Therefore, it is no coincidence that Ricoeur’s more mature philosophical perspective on the human being is outlined within the field of hermeneutic research. We find its first configuration within his essay on Freud, in relation to the theme of the conflict of interpretations. This, in fact, is not simply an issue relating to the Ricoeurian method or procedure. The idea of subjectivity takes shape as a dialectical process of archaeology and teleology. The essence of this dialectic —

<sup>29</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “La tâche de l’herméneutique : en venant de Schleiermacher et de Dilthey,” in *Exegesis. Problèmes de méthode et exercices de lecture*, eds. François Bovon, Grégoire Rouiller (Neuchâtel : Delachaux et Niestlé, 1975), 179–200.

<sup>30</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer, D. G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 220–221.



identified by relating, respectively, the Freudian procedure to the Hegelian one — is given by the underlying articulation of *regression* and *progression*. In other words, subjectivity is configured as a conflict between the regressive forces generated by the unconscious and the progressive forces of the spirit.<sup>31</sup>

The same goes for the theme of the “world of the text” that we find in *Time and Narrative*: it is not explained and justified entirely within the *ratio* of a narrative theory but still operates within a hermeneutic conception of the subject according to which, as already said, there is no self-understanding or personal emancipation without the mediation of language and texts. This vision culminates in the idea of narrative identity, outlined in the general conclusions of *Time and Narrative* in the context of the treatment of the first aporia of temporality. Narrative identity, explains Ricoeur, is a “fragile offshoot issuing from the union of history and fiction”, which represents “the assignment to an individual or a community of a specific identity”<sup>32</sup>. Here, the concept of identity “is taken in the sense of a practical category”<sup>33</sup>. Without the help of narration, according to Ricoeur, the problem of personal identity remains destined to an antinomy without a solution: either being understood as a subject identical to itself in the diversity of its states or, following Hume and Nietzsche, being understood as a substantialist illusion. For Ricoeur, “this dilemma disappears if we substitute for identity understood in the sense of being the same (*idem*), identity understood in the sense of oneself as selfsame [soi-même] (*ipse*). The difference between *idem* and *ipse* is nothing more than the difference between a substantial or formal identity and a narrative identity”<sup>34</sup>.

This connection between ipseity and narrative identity confirms one of Ricoeur's oldest beliefs:

[...] the self of self-knowledge is not the egotistical and narcissistic ego whose hypocrisy and naiveté the hermeneutics of suspicion have denounced, along with its aspects of an ideological superstructure and infantile and neurotic archaism. The self of self-knowledge is the fruit of an examined life, to recall Socrates' phrase in the *Apology*. And an examined life is, in large part, one purged, one clarified by the cathartic effect of the narratives, be they historical or fictional, conveyed by our culture. So self-constancy refers to a self instructed by the works of a culture that it has applied to itself.<sup>35</sup>

It is the concept of narrative identity, as the cornerstone of Ricoeur's philosophy of the human being, that grounds both the value of the pre-eminence of the literary in the framework of non- or pre-philosophical contributions to speculative research and the value of the act of reading in the formation of the self. In this sense, it is the trilogy of *Time and Narrative* that constitutes the fundamental ground of reference, for it is in it that Ricoeur elaborates its theory. The construction of the plot, present in both historical and fictional narrative, reproduces, in the form of creative

<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 459 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. III, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 246.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.*

<sup>34</sup> *Id.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.



imitation, the lived temporal experience. The basic hypothesis, which Ricoeur reviews in the important third chapter (“Time and Narrative: Threefold *Mimesis*”) of the first volume is that

between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity. To put it another way, *time becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence*.<sup>36</sup>

Drawing the concepts of *muthos* (emplotment) and *mimesis* (mimetic activity) from the Aristotelian perspective, Ricoeur interprets emplotment as creative imitation of human action. This creative imitation responds to the triple function of prefiguration (*mimesis* 1), configuration (*mimesis* 2) and refiguration (*mimesis* 3). The textual configuration that constitutes the literariness of the literary work performs a mediating function between the prefiguration of the practical field (*mimesis* 1) and its refiguration with the internalisation of the reading work (*mimesis* 3). *Mimesis* 2 highlights how the terms that characterise the plot at this stage, namely schematisation and traditionality, do not mark an opposition between the interiority and exteriority of the text. Rather, “schematization and traditionality are [...] from the start categories of the interaction between the operations [*operativité*] of writing and of reading”.<sup>37</sup> It is from this perspective of interpreting reading as a dynamic, a living act that Ricoeur can state the following:

On the one hand, the received paradigms structure readers’ expectations and aid them in recognizing the formal rule, the genre, or the type exemplified by narrated story. [...] On the other hand, it is the act of reading that accompanies the narrative’s configuration and actualizes its capacity to be followed. To follow a story is to actualize it by reading it.<sup>38</sup>

The implication of this discourse is very profound. Ricoeur is not merely illustrating the dynamic of reading as such. Reconfiguration is not the subjective and relativistic effect of reading a text but an imaginative metamorphosis that, while bringing the narrative world to representation, defines a scenario of new understanding and new (possible) initiative in the reader’s life; this is possible because of the narrative dimension of human identity.

## Conclusion

It is precisely the centrality of anthropological discourse and the close connection that exists between the concept of narrative identity and the philosophy of the capable human being that justifies Ricoeur’s privileging of the fields of historical and fictional narrative. Ricoeur develops neither a general theory nor a general philosophy of the act of reading. His research was not guided by a theoretical-philosophical interest in systematic analysis of the possibilities of textual hermeneutics and its various implications (gnoseological, epistemological, etc.): the dilemma of personal identity and emancipatory processes remains at the centre.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. I, trans. K. McLaughlin, D. Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 52.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*

It is in this sense that any relevance attributable to the “world of the text” that emerged with the act of reading scientific texts takes on a completely secondary and marginal value compared to the “world of the text” that arises with the act of reading the literary text. When he talks about the “world of the text,” Ricoeur is thinking of the process of appropriation, that is, the dynamics of self-understanding that occurs when faced with a text which becomes like the mirror of one’s soul. On the one hand, as we read in the *Écrits et conférences 2* (2010), “the concept of ‘subject’ that corresponds to that of the world of the text is the concept of appropriation.” By this, Ricoeur means “the very act of understanding himself/herself in front of the text.”<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, as we read in the article “Identité narrative” (1988), “self-awareness is an interpretation; the interpretation of oneself, in turn, finds a privileged mediation in the narration, among other signs and symbols.” Narration, which can be linked both to history and to fiction, gives the narration of one’s personal life the configuration of a “fictitious story or, if you prefer, a historical fiction, comparable to those biographies of great men in which history and fiction mix.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Écrits et conférences*, vol. II : *Herméneutique* (Paris: Seuil, 2010), 253.

<sup>40</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Identité narrative,” in *Esprit*, 7-8 (1988), 295.

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