

Look at us, library rats turned into walking encyclopedias; individuals, void of any creative instinct, reduced to wearing masks, born with grey hairs. *Historians, charged to guard history, have become eunuchs and history a harem which they oversee. It is no longer the eternal feminine that draws us upward – as in the closing verses of Goethe's Faust – but the eternal objective, celebrated by our historical education and culture...the genuine historian must have the strength to recast the well known into something never heard before and to proclaim the general so simply and profoundly that one overlooks its simplicity because of its profundity and its profundity because of its simplicity. It is this strength that makes all the difference between master and slave.* -Paul Ricoeur in "Towards a Hermeneutics of Historical Consciousness"

***Life: a Story in Search of a Narrator*, by Paul Ricoeur in Facts & Values**

stories are told, life is lived

and yet we speak of life as a story, "that life has to do with narration has always been known and said." Paul Ricoeur takes this statement and opens up a new point of departure by rethinking the relationship between story and life, and conceiving of it "such that fiction helps to make life...human". In *Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator*, Ricoeur draws upon Aristotle's *Poetics*, using the concept of plot in relation to "composition" or *mythos*. "Plot" here refers to the idea of a well-constructed history, and it is from this main point that the relationship between life and narrative is rethought. It is key to remember that for Aristotle, plot "is not a static structure but an...integrative process which...does not come to fruition other than in the living receiver of the story being told."

The *act of plotting* can be defined very generally "as a synthesis of heterogeneous elements...it is a synthesis of multiple events or incidents...which contribute to the progress of the story as much as it contributes to its beginning and its end." Organizing these incidents, elements, or events into an intelligible whole, is narration.¹ Plot is also very much about *the discordant concord or concordant discord*, a term that Ricoeur likes to use. In other words, plot contains a tensive unity in which the elements themselves are internally coherent and cohesive. The final element of plot refers to time, and gives importance to the ideas of succession and configuration. Ricoeur again refers to Aristotle, laying a foundation and thread that will weave together both the story and the life. "Aristotle does not hesitate to say that every well-told story teaches something; even more, he said that stories reveal universal aspects of the human condition and that, therefore, poetry is more philosophical than the history of historians, who are too dependent on anecdotic aspects of life...It is in the function of poetry in its narrative and dramatic forms, to set before imagination and meditation situations each of which make up thought-experiments by means of which we learn to join the ethical aspect of human behaviour to happiness and unhappiness, to fortune and misfortune." What Ricoeur is suggesting here is the utter importance of story to reveal phronetic² knowledge (not theological).

The narrative has a history all its own, a *tradition* in many senses, tradition here seen as a living thing, "as a living passing-on of innovation which can always be re-activated..."³ For Ricoeur, tradition is shaped by two factors, *innovation and sedimentation*. To elaborate, "the rules change under pressure of innovation, but they change slowly and even resist change in virtue of the sedimentation process." It is this careful tension between innovation and sedimentation that allow new works to come about while still adhering to a common framework. "Every work is an original production, a new being within the realm of discourse. The reverse, however, is no less true: innovation remains a strategy governed by rules; the work of the imagination does not come from nothing."

In the statement, stories are told, life is lived, a great divide appears between what is fiction and what is life. Ricoeur makes a connection, bridges the gap, by redefining the terms fiction and life.

1. He begins by tackling fiction. The process of composition, of configuration, the arrangement of elements and incidents, (recall this is what makes a plot/story for him), does not realize itself in

¹ The cunning manipulation and adjustment of pieces...I am reminded of Daedalus.

² Phronetic sciences are aimed at social commentary and social action, ie praxis.

the text but rather in the reader. "More precisely: the meaning or the significance of a story wells up from *the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader.*" It is about the act of reading.

"Allow me to stress the terms I just used: the world of the reader and the world of the text. To speak of the world of the text is to emphasize that trait of every literary work by which it opens up a horizon of possible experience, a world in which it would be possible to dwell. A text is not an entity closed in upon itself; it is the projection of a new universe, different from the one in which we live. Appropriating a work through reading, it is to unfold the implicit horizon of the world which embraces the action, the personages, the events of the story told. The result is that the reader belongs to both the experiential horizon of the work imaginatively, and the horizon of his action concretely. The awaited horizon and the experienced horizon meet and fuse without ceasing. In this sense Gadamer speaks of the 'fusion of horizons' essential to the act of understanding a text."

Ricoeur attacks literary criticism by pointing out that analyzing texts is essentially unproductive, the looking at a text within a text. This is not where meaning and significance in the real-world come from. "The real world is extra-linguistic. Reality," for Ricoeur, "is not contained within the dictionary or grammar...(a text) is a mediation between man and the world, between man and man, between man and himself. Mediation between man and the world is called reference; mediation between man and man is communication; mediation between man and himself is self-understanding. A literary work brings together these three dimensions of reference, communication, and self-understanding." It is at this point where Ricoeur finds the limits of linguistics, the point where hermeneutics can begin. **"In a word, hermeneutics takes hold of the hinge between the (internal) configuration of a work and the (external) re-figuration of a life."** It is necessary for one to follow and accompany the text, to re-actualize it. The reader must follow along, accompanying the play between innovation and sedimentation. *"It is the act of reading which completes the work, which transforms it into a reading guide with its zones of indetermination, its latent richness of interpretation, its ability to be reinterpreted in novel ways within historical contexts that are always new."*

With this said, story and life can be reconciled with one another, "since the (act of) reading itself is a way of living in the fictitious universe of the work...we can already say that stories are told but also lived in *the imaginary mode.*"

2. Now that he has overturned the fictive portion of story as told, Ricoeur questions life as lived. Human life, he contends, is extremely different from animal or mineral existence. We can understand concepts which he groups together as *the semantics of action* (words such as project, goal, means, circumstance). Not only so, but human life also possesses the unique traits related to the aspects of making, of being able to make, and of knowing how to make. These are all forms of *symbolic mediation* which speak of action. In fact, "if indeed action (human life) can be narrated it is because it is already articulated in signs, rules and norms; action is always mediated symbolically." Around every such symbolic action lies a descriptive context/setting.

"We are able to interpret a given gesture as having this or that meaning; the same movement of the arm can, depending on the context, be understood as a greeting, of hailing a taxi, or of casting a vote. Before they are subjected to interpretation, symbols are the internal interpreters of an action. In this way symbolism confers on action a first readability. It makes of action a quasi-text for which the symbols furnish the rules of significance, in the context of which such specific behaviour can be interpreted."

Life is also often seen "as an activity and desire in search of a narrative...are we not inclined to see a certain chain of episodes of our life as stories not yet told, stories that seek to be told, stories that offer anchor points for the narrative?" Ricoeur provides the example of psychoanalysis, the unfolding of untold or repressed stories, as evidence. He also speaks of the judge in a courtroom, who must construct the untold story of the victim through told stories of witnesses. The emergence of the story inevitably leads to a future untold narrative of life.

"From this double analysis we learn that fiction...is an irreducible dimension of understanding of the self. If it is true that fiction cannot be completed other than in life, and that life can not be understood other than through stories we tell about it, then we are led to say that a life examined...is a life narrated."

*it is a narrated life that brings order to our temporal existence.*⁴

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Towards a Hermeneutics of Historical Consciousness, by Paul Ricoeur in Time&Narrative, Vol 3

the project of history
the "space of experience"
& the "horizon of expectation"

when said and done, these three will be seen as concepts completely interwoven one with the other and entirely inseparable. For a moment recall that for Ricoeur an essential part of human life is the ability to make. From this point, he will overturn the idea that history is something to be made (there exists the common misconception of "making" history). Rather, he will present the notion of a *historical present*, an idea which unlike "made" history, "is capable of inaugurating a new course of events." It is within the historical present, in the transition from future to past, that allows a "time for initiative" (*action*) – in other words, "the time when the weight of history that has already been made is deposited, suspended, and interrupted, and the dream of history yet to be made is transposed into a responsible decision."

Ricoeur draws upon the work of Reinhart Koselleck, adapting the categories of a "space of experience" and the "horizon of expectation" to understand the relationship that exist between the future and the past, and the great potentiality of the present. Consider for a moment the terminology, the SPACE of experience versus the HORIZON of expectation – "SPACE evokes the idea of different possible traversals following a multitude of itineraries, and above all the idea of a stratified structure assembled like a pile of sheets of paper", a concrete, stable, background to draw upon. On the other hand, expectation/HORIZON is wide and broad enough to include things such as hopes and fears, what is wished and what is chosen, rational calculations as well

⁴ "Augustine sees time as being born in the unceasing differentiation of the three aspects of the present: expectation, which he calls the presence of the future; memory, which he calls the presence of the past; awareness, which is the presence of the present. Hence, the instability of time; nay, its ceaseless decomposition. Thus Augustine can define time as extendedness of the soul, distention animi. It consists in the permanent contrast between the instability of the human 'now' and the stability of the divine 'now' which embraces past, present, and future in unity of creative vision and action."

as curiosities. It is this precise lack of symmetry between the space of experience that is important and often overlooked. "This opposition between gathering together and unfolding implies that experience tends toward integration (background, foundation), expectation tends toward the breaking open of (new, unfound) perspectives."

What Ricoeur sees, is that the space of experience and this horizon of expectation have been polarized one from the other in this "making" of history. What he will do is reconcile the two and recognize the importance of their overlapping. First though, he lays out the background of how such a great chasm originated. The great gap is due mainly to three factors:

1. The idea of a new time, the labelling of periods- (i.e. the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Reformation) As a result of these distinctions, a new quality of time emerges redefining our relationship to the future. "Time is no longer just a neutral form of history but its force as well." By placing things into periods, what happens is a "trajectory of 'progress'" is put into motion, to keep moving forward without looking back.⁵

2. Related to progress, the concept of accelerated time. "Because progress is accelerating...our space of experience noticeably contracts, burdened as it is by the acquisitions of tradition, and the authority of these acquisitions withers." What is really happening in the modern age is that the space of experience is contracting, which in turn makes the past seem more distant, thus increasing the gap between the space of experience and our horizon of expectation. This horizon is withdrawing from us faster than we can move towards it. And when our expectation can no longer fix itself on a determined future, "our present finds itself torn between two fleeing horizons."

3. Third, the belief that humans are more and more capable of making history (the temporalization of history). Ricoeur suggests that this is actually the most important and fragile component which indicates the new horizon of expectation. In this sense, if a new future is opened up by our new times, then we can bend it to our plans, we can make history. And if progress can be accelerated it is because we actually sped up its course. However, Ricoeur points out how utterly horrendous such a thought is. He contends that "what happens is always something other than what we expected...in addition to the unintended results that action brings about, such action only takes place in circumstances that it has not produced...men make their own history, but not as they please. They do not choose for themselves but have to work upon circumstances as they find them, have to fashion the material handed down by the past."

We are affected by history and we affect ourselves by the history we make. It precisely this tie between historical action and received past (which we did not make) that preserves the dialectical relationship between our horizon of expectation and our space of experience. It is at this point that two are inseparably linked together.

This is where the hermeneutics begins...

"We must also resist any narrowing of the space of experience. To do this, we must struggle against the tendency to consider the past only from the angle of what is done, unchangeable,

⁵ Galileo, the beginning of new time - "the beginning of the rule of instrumental reason, the power given to rationalizing hegemonies in the name of universalism, the repression of differences in the name of these Promethean claims are all stigmata, visible to all, of those times so conducive to liberation in many ways."

and past. We have to reopen the past, to revivify its unaccomplished, cut-off –even slaughtered—possibilities. In short, when confronted with the adage that the future is open and contingent in every aspect but that the past is unequivocally closed and necessary, we have to make our expectations more determinate and our experience less so. For these are two faces of one and the same task, for only determinate expectations can have the retroactive effect on the past of revealing it as a living tradition."

opening the past to the historical present

Ricoeur now will recall Gadamer's fusion of horizons (the awaited horizon and the experienced horizon which meet and fuse without ceasing). "This notion of a fusion of horizons leads to the theme that finally what is at stake in the hermeneutics of historical consciousness is the tension between the horizon of the past and that of the present. In this way, the problem of the relation between past and present is set in a new light. The past is revealed to us through the projection of a historical horizon that is both detached from the horizon of the present and taken up into and fused with it...here the work of history and the work of the historian mutually assist each other."

Tradition he insists (remember tradition is a living thing which can be re-activated), "is an operation that can only make sense dialectically through the exchange between the interpreted past and the interpreting present." The importance of tradition lies in the fact that we never create from nothing, but rather are always first of in the situation of being heirs. The past questions us and calls us into question before we can question it or call it into question. It is here the dialectic nature of tradition emerges (recall the importance of the act of reading, the relationship between reader and text). "The past questions us to the extent that we question it. It answers us to the extent we answer it."

In all of this, a judging consciousness is necessary insofar as it is the master of meaning for Ricoeur. It is unfeasible to take a distance from the topic at hand. "Through tradition we find ourselves already situated in an order of meaning and therefore of possible truth." Hermeneutics demands an acute sharpening of the consciousness.⁶ Hermeneutics then emerges in the realm of language and communication (the tradition of language). In this space of discussion, when an idea is brought forth, it affects our horizon of expectation as much as it does our space of experience. Here again, the two become an inseparable pair.

"The hermeneutical approach...begins by acknowledging this exteriority of the past in relation to every attempt centered upon a constituting consciousness, whether it be admitted, concealed, or simply not recognized as such. The hermeneutical approach shifts the problematic from the sphere of knowledge into that of being-affected-by, that is, into the sphere of what we have not made."

a time for initiative & Medusa's gaze

Following the notion that hermeneutics takes place in the realm of dialogue, we have the unique ability to act out and "make things present". Through the act of speech and speaking out, it is possible to "make initiative into meaningful action". Human acting after all symbolic mediation articulated remember by signs, norms, rules that situate it in a certain descriptive context/setting.

⁶ Gadamer says, "Hence the hermeneutically trained mind will also include historical consciousness."

"In the broad sense, every speech act (or every discourse) commits the speaker and does so in the present. I cannot assert something without introducing a tacit clause of sincerity into my saying it, in virtue of which I effectively signify what I am saying, and more than I can do so without holding as true what I affirm. It is in this way that every speech initiative...makes me responsible for what is said in my saying it...(it is) a speech that binds me."

The historical present becomes that axial moment where everything collapses together and opens up from simultaneously. It is here that constitutes the model of every beginning grounded in a firm base of past events. It is more than just a mere hinge between past and present, but the point in which an explosion of opening-ups can appear and take hold. Ricoeur recalls Alfred Shutz's notion of the vivid present.⁷ The historical present is thus something which is immediately apprehended as a common space experience. As a result of this public/common space experience, the responsibilities of such actions are much greater.^{8 ****}



⁷ Alberto Perez Gomez on Alfred Shutz's Symbol, Reality & Society→"Thus we can realize the importance of the face-to-face relationship. Not only does each partner share the other in a vivid present; each of them with all the manifestations of his spontaneous life becomes an element of the other's surroundings and partaking of the same world; but more importantly, only in this kind of relationship can the partner look at the self of his fellow-man as an unbroken totality in a vivid present; something that the individual can never do by himself."

^{8****} **an important note to selves:** Remember Architecture partakes of the public realm in one of the most intimate manners. The responsibilities this implies... Oh my, oh my... What have we gotten ourselves into?