

Paul Ricoeur and Narrative Paradoxes*

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Summary

The paper examines the paradoxes evident in Ricoeur's theses of literary narrative and points out that these paradoxes have induced subsequent reflection and suggestions for possible solutions. On the one hand, Ricoeur identifies narrative by representing both time and the identity of the subject as relative; on the other hand, he deals with the same narrative, employing a phenomenological or anthropological approach to represent time and the identity of the subject. The narrative can, however, also be read according to a duality which, in itself, constitutes another paradox. The conclusions reached are that, in terms of writing, the singularity of the literary narrative is stressed; in terms of temporality, narrative can be interpreted according to one of three aspects of time; and in terms of representation of action, it is assumed that agents either respond to situations, or act to reveal situations.

Throughout the above brief survey one should constantly be aware of the significance of the intrinsic presence of asymmetric reference pertaining to the subject of the action, the representation of time and of action. This asymmetry, characterising the fictional narrative, provides it with more freedom and a much wider scope.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel gee 'n beskouing oor die paradokse wat in Ricoeur se tesis oor literêre narratief voorkom, en wys daarop dat hierdie paradokse gelei het tot nadenke en voorstelle vir moontlike oplossings. Enersyds identifiseer Ricoeur die narratief deur tyd, sowel as die identiteit van die subjek, as relatief voor te stel. Andersyds gaan hy om met dieselfde narratief vanuit 'n fenomenologiese en antropologiese perspektief in sy voorstelling van tyd en die subjek se identiteit. Die narratief kan, insgelyks, ook gelees word volgens 'n dualiteit wat op sigself weer op 'n paradoks dui. Daar word tot die slotsom gekom dat, in terme van skryf as sodanig, word die besonderheid van die literêre narratief beklemtoon; volgens temporaliteit beoordeel, kan die narratief volgens een van die drie aspekte van tyd vertolk word; en in die geval van die voorstelling van die handeling, word aanvaar dat die subjekte óf op situasies reageer, óf situasies blootlê.

Daar moet gelet word op die belangrikheid van die intrinsieke teenwoordigheid van asimmetriese verwysing rakende die subjek van die handeling, die voorstelling van tyd, en die handeling as sodanig. Die fiktiewe narratief word deur asimmetrie gekarakteriseer wat geleentheid bied vir groter vryheid en trefwydte.

The aim of this paper is not so much to re-examine the theses of narrative expounded by Paul Ricoeur in *Temps et récit* (1983, 1984, 1985), as to

bring the theses of this work into play with other theses of Paul Ricoeur and other works of his. Instead of determining continuities or discontinuities of his thought and reflection, I want to point out the paradoxes presented by these various theses and works dealing with literary narrative, and to suggest some avenues of reflection and solutions that can be read in(to) these paradoxes.

By comparing *La Métaphore vive* (1975), *Temps et récit* (1983), *Du texte à l'action, Essais d'herméneutique II* (1986) and *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), one brings into play three types of thesis relating to narrative, whether it be literary or non-literary narrative. *Temps et récit* defines narrative as a temporal refiguration which ultimately allows one to match the temporality represented by narrative and the actual time of the world. As an example, it will suffice to consider here the last part of the second volume of *Temps et récit*, *La configuration dans le récit de fiction* (1984), which examines Proust's novel *A la recherche du temps perdu*. The temporal interpretation of narrative cannot be dissociated from a phenomenology of time, which gives an account of the activity of narrating and the treatment of the past - the treatment of the past that is presupposed by any narrative, whether it be literary or non-literary, fictional or non-fictional. To narrate is basically nothing more than bringing together, by means of refiguration, discordant moments in time and presenting the figure of their agreement. This agreement can be understood according to two perspectives. The first one has just been stated: time can be represented as one. The second, in *Temps et récit*, cannot be separated from the first perspective: narrative presupposes the representation of an action and, consequently, constant reference to an agent. In other words, the figuration of temporal continuity is also the figuration of the invariable identity of the human agent as represented in the narrative. This second perspective raises a question not directly dealt with in *Temps et récit*, but which is tackled in *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990): under what conditions can one posit such a human agent whose identity remains constant, when many narratives (particularly literary narratives and contemporary literary narratives) are at pains to undo the notions of action and the constant identity of the agent? This question cannot be separated from the objections raised against *Temps et récit*: the theses of this work cannot explain the status of the agent and temporal representation in anti-fiction or the anti-novel.

Beyond the detail of Paul Ricoeur's arguments, the answer to this question and to these objections also contains, in *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), a phenomenological reference. Indeed, contemporary anti-fiction and the anti-novel can make difficult or uncertain the answers to the following questions that cannot be dissociated from narrative: Who is speaking?

Who is doing? Who is telling his/her story? What is the subject of the imputations being made? (1990: 28). But these questions (which are, in fact, also the usual questions of narratology) appear, to Paul Ricoeur, to result in two simultaneous answers. A first answer takes into account, in the face of what would be the design of a constant identity, the interplay of difference, variation, erasure of the identity of the agent and, consequently, erasure of action. A second answer consists in indicating that the subject of the narrated action, who can precisely be represented with variations of identity and even without an identity, "is equal to the widest concept of doing and suffering man" (1990: 29). This answer is equivalent to not dissociating, on the one hand, the identity of the subject of the narrated action, even considering this identity in a negative light, and on the other hand, the constant reference to an anthropological subject, who is identified by suffering and action, i.e. by *pathos* and *praxis*. Here Paul Ricoeur reverts to the logic that presided over the temporal characterisation of narrative: whatever the presentations of the identity of the subject narrated in the narrative may be, this identity can be read according to the anthropological data given. This kind of argumentation comes full circle when Paul Ricoeur assimilates the act of narrating to an action that thus engages all the temporal and anthropological characteristics of the action. The conclusion is self-evident: under these conditions, there are only narratives that recount global time and the anthropological subject.

The interest of these theses of Paul Ricoeur certainly lies less in their assertory and conclusive nature than in the argumentative strategies and aims they claim. Basically, Paul Ricoeur's intention is to challenge both what would be a strongly identitary definition of narrative (as much in terms of temporal play as in terms of the characterisation of the subject of the narrated action) as well as what would be a deconstructionist definition of narrative, equally in terms of temporal play and the subject of the narrated action. The paradox of the hermeneutics of narrative proposed by Paul Ricoeur lies therefore in the following: to identify narrative with a relativist representation of time and the identity of the subject; to identify this same narrative with a phenomenological or anthropological representation of time and the identity of the subject.

There is, however, another possible reading of this paradox to be found in Paul Ricoeur. The paradox consists of a reading of the narrative according to a duality. The narrative is an attestation of the plurality of time - this is why narrative is always a construction of time - and equally an attestation of global time. The duality is formulated, according to the same logic, with regard to the attestation of the subject presented by the narrative. This duality can itself be read in a double manner. As suggested in *Temps et récit*

(1983) and *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), the notation of the duality is ultimately understood through the anthropological perspective. But as also suggested in *La Métaphore vive* (1975) and *Du texte à l'action. Essais d'herméneutique II* (1986), this duality can be treated, not according to the privilege accorded to one of these terms - it has just been said that this term is the phenomenological term or the anthropological term - but according to the alternative traced respectively by the notations of relative time and global time, the notations of the subject with an uncertain identity and the anthropological subject. Thus there would be no reason to emphasise that the relative or plural time of narrative is written and read against the background of global time. Thus there would be no reason to show that the variations or erasure of identity are written and read in narrative under the sign of the doing and suffering anthropological subject. There would be reason, in either case, to note the following: narrative is written according to an oscillation between two series of two notations - relative time/global time, subject with a variable identity/anthropological subject - without this movement between the two leading to a dialectical resolution.

To institute a first recording of this oscillation, in narrative, between two figurations of time and two figurations of subject, it is sufficient to recall that *Essais d'herméneutique* (1986) notes that it is fitting to "do justice to the signifying of the trace" and that the future of writing, particularly literary writing, lies in its inactuality. It is equally sufficient to recall that *La Métaphore vive* (1975) insists on the individualising character of the metaphor because the latter is a play on denomination and predication. These two notations of the *Essais* and *La Métaphore vive* can be easily interpreted.

"To do justice to the signifying of the trace": by this notation that recalls, through the word "trace", the theses of Derrida on writing as trace, Paul Ricoeur indicates that the temporal pertinence of the letter is precisely its belonging to several times - the time of its inscription, the time of its reading, the time of the present that is neither that of its inscription nor its reading. The letter is no doubt that which causes its inscription and its reading to be read. It is also that which is, by its inactuality, the mediator of these times, without this mediation implying a refiguration of time nor a return to global time. "To do justice to the signifying of the trace" is equivalent first of all to noting the play of temporal duality involved in the recognition of the trace - precisely an alternative between past and future. It can be said that narrative is in the first place this kind of interplay between what is the time of the attested, presumed, imagined past, and the time of reading. To narrate is also equivalent, through the time of narration, to constructing this duality. To narrate is equivalent, again and for the same

reasons, to playing, in the narrative and by means of constructing a plot, with the various moments of the narrative as respective mediators of one another. These moments are therefore presented as so many plays on duality or alternative in relation to each other.

This play on mediation can be organised, although not necessarily, according to cause, just as it can exclude being organised according to teleological time, finalised according to a necessity of action or according to a global representation of time. Thus, the analysis that Paul Ricoeur proposes of *A la recherche du temps perdu* in *Temps et récit, La configuration dans le récit de fiction* (1984), and which concludes with the phenomenological notation of global time, should not be taken as a paradigmatic analysis. Indeed, the letter of Proust's text contradicts, at least in part, this analysis:

A book is a large cemetery where on most tombstones one can no longer read the names that have been erased. Sometimes on the contrary one remembers the name very well, but without knowing if something of the being who bore this name survives in these pages. This young girl with the very deep-set eyes and drawling voice, is she here? and, if she does indeed lie here, where exactly? one no longer knows, and how is it possible to find out under the flowers?

(Ricoeur 1954 III: 903)

In other words, "to do justice to the signifying of the trace" can exclude the recognition of global time. Narrative, no matter how efficiently and exemplarily the plot might be constructed and an action formed, is in all probability just this calculated game between the notation of the signifying of the trace - a notation that is a recognition of time, but that excludes any certain temporal teleology - and the temporal organisation that can be drawn from it and that is exposed, among other means, by the construction of a plot and the representation of an action.

In this interplay of the various theses of *Temps et récit* and the *Essais*, narrative seems to be that which brings into play narratively the transmission of the past as past, i.e. as a letter that cannot attain the vitality of its meaning, but that is merely, in the narrative, presented, represented as the means of a temporal mediation, the very letter that is figured (represented?) by the narrative and that outlines the dualities and alternatives already mentioned.

Rather paradoxically, *Temps et récit*, in a first hypothesis, undoes any idea of a unitary story that can be drawn from the trace, the traces, but, in a second hypothesis, affirms the temporalisation of Being (*Temps et récit. Le temps raconté* (1985: 117)). This second hypothesis is the limit of the first hypothesis and the justification of the proposed reading of Proust. In an ultimate paradox, Paul Ricoeur, in *Temps et récit*, identifies what can be

recounted (i.e., in fact, all the scriptural traces of the past) with what can form the subject of a narration, and defines narrative as the limit of the refiguration of time, as the limit of the representation of the time that encompassed us (*Le temps raconté* 1985: 374). This last notation can be reformulated: narrative is the fable of the unfinished refiguration of time, inevitably unfinished since time, in the terms of Paul Ricoeur, is Being itself and the scriptural traces are the signs of this time and the mediations of the experience of this time.

But, on the basis of these paradoxes, and therefore of Paul Ricoeur himself, one should, with greater accuracy, say: narrative is not inevitably read against the background of all-encompassing time; what is recountable is not necessarily the figure of this all-encompassing time. One has to return specifically to the notion of the trace and to the justice that has to be done to the trace. Indeed, the fact that narrative figures the limit of temporal refiguration ultimately means the following: narrative is constructed and read against what could characterise it as an allegory of time - unless this narrative explicitly claims to be an allegory of the time of Being. Beyond this allegory of time, any narrative treats the recountable as the elements of temporal mediation, and claims to be the means of such a temporal mediation. This is the only way to interpret the limit that narrative presents of temporal refiguration. Here we find once again the play of duality and alternative referred to above in connection with the trace. Moreover, it shows that the limit of temporal refiguration borne by narrative, explicitly defines narrative by the interplay of its internal temporal alternatives and by the possible transfer of these alternatives to an imagined or real world of reference.

Just as the notation of the trace allowed one to specify the duality and alternative traced temporally by narrative and, consequently, to answer the temporal paradox of narrative, the notation of the individualising character of the metaphor will make it possible to indicate that the treatment of any individual and, consequently, the subject of the recounted action, also comes from such a play of alternative and duality. And this on the basis of the very theses of Paul Ricoeur. To insist on the individualising character of the metaphor and on the play of denomination and predication allegedly constituted by the metaphor, is no doubt equivalent, in Paul Ricoeur's terms, to identifying the metaphor with an exercise of redescription - to make one see in another light what is named - and thus placing the metaphor on a parallel with the refiguration of time, that narrative purportedly brings into play. One knows that Paul Ricoeur does not separate such a definition and such a practice of the metaphor from phenomenological and ontological intuition: the proximity in meaning constructed by the metaphor from two terms

would presuppose an ontological proximity of the things themselves (see Alain Pierrot, "La référence des énoncés métaphoriques" (1988)). Metaphorical redescription is thus conceived, by Paul Ricoeur, both as a properly linguistico-semantic exercise that transgresses semantic frontiers and as an exercise that would essentially state the continuity and the encompassing character of the world and its objects.

This thesis is not distinguishable, in Paul Ricoeur's work, from the notation of the individualising function of the metaphor, according both to the semantic play and to the play of reference. The paradox is formulated explicitly here: metaphor expresses a certain identity of individuals in their difference, inasmuch as they are different, at the same time as it presupposes the ontological proximity of these individuals. A first commentary of this paradox consists in specifying: this proximity is constructed - such as the famous metaphor of the surrealists' "black milk" - and does not necessarily oblige one to conclude there is an ontological proximity or continuity of the objects and the data thus evoked. To continue with the example of "black milk", the question is not, after all, to know whether there is proximity between milk and blackness, but to know what could be the mechanism and justification of such an individualisation. In the "black milk" metaphor, this individualisation merges with a way of disfiguring milk. As Paul Ricoeur shows, metaphor is elaborated according to an asymmetry: on the one side an ascription or nomination, which presupposes an existing entity - in this case, milk; on the other side, a predication, which is a judgement, and which, in this case, presents a transgression of the usual qualifications of milk. One can say a redescription takes place here if one lends an essentially descriptive status to the metaphor, as Paul Ricoeur does, and if one accords the latter an essentially referential function. But in a more pertinent fashion, the asymmetry noted by Paul Ricoeur is also the means of identifying an object, a subject, according to a contrast, precisely that which is related to the asymmetry. This identification leaves completely open the possibility of the referral to a reference or only to the enunciation of the speaker. In other words, the function of the metaphor - to bring into play the asymmetry of ascription and predication - does not allow the deciphering of the metaphor. This impossibility demands that the scene of writing and the scene of reading be characterised as that which can be questioned only from inside the metaphorical formula. The asymmetry of the metaphor between ascription and predication means that the metaphorical nomination constitutes in itself a first play of alternative, and a second play of alternative in relation to any possible nomination of the same object or the same subject. The question posed by the paradox of the metaphor such as Paul Ricoeur defines it, is therefore that of the status of this alternative

and this duality.

To write according to the metaphor is not so much to write according to the recognition of some ontological continuity or proximity, as to write according to the elaboration of a questioning of singularity, starting from the singularity created by this metaphor. What happens therefore in the case of "black milk"? The designation and questioning of singularity are elaborated by the asymmetry of the metaphor, by the alternative that it forms. It is noteworthy that this approach to the paradox of metaphor is related to the characterisation of the recounted subject, such as it is proposed in *Temps et récit* (1983) and *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990). In this perspective, if one omits the anthropological background of the characterisation of the subject in the story recounted, this subject appears through its various positions in the narrative, through the variations or lack of its identity, as that which is subjected, in the time of the narrative, of the action recounted, to this kind of play of nomination and this kind of play of variable predication. In other words, this subject cannot be the allegory of itself, unless it is explicitly presented according to such an allegory. These remarks elicit the following observation: narrative is, in principle, the staging (or *mise en scène*) of singularities; in the framework of temporal representation, except if the latter demands an allegory, there is only representation of singularities.

These conclusions drawn from the paradoxes of Paul Ricoeur will possibly seem unexpected. It is important to consider what their usefulness can be in terms of the theory of literary narrative. Historiographic narrative is excluded from this reflection. As regards this kind of narrative, it will suffice to recall Hayden White's remark in *The Content of Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987): The hypothesis of global time - White calls it "deep time" - is, for Paul Ricoeur, the way of ignoring the irony of historiographic narrative, i.e. the argumentative or representative contradiction which the latter can contain in itself or with regard to its reference data, and which prevents this narrative from being part of the plenary allegory of human action in time.

In a specifically literary perspective that does not have to consider this characterisation of the historiographic narrative, the conclusions that are drawn from these paradoxes of Paul Ricoeur can be formulated as follows:

1. In terms of writing, in terms of representation of the subject of the action recounted, the literary narrative can be seen as a singularity. Singularity because it is elaborated according to a play of asymmetry between nomination of the action and predication of this action. By this asymmetry, writing and representation of the subject of the action recounted are the result either of a simple ascription, in other words

a nominalism, or of a predication, in other words a judgement of class and identification. The latter places this singularity in a certain category and yet cannot be completely validated by the narrative. We can say this singularity is indifferent insofar as it can be read both for itself and according to this play of asymmetry. Here we come back indirectly to the notation of the limit of temporal refiguration.

2. In terms of temporality, of the representation of time, once the narrative is not explicitly a temporal allegory - creating a temporal teleology - in concordance with an action, narrative is defined according to a triple play of time:
 - a. that of a temporal mediation that is aware of the impossibility of being validated, but that suggests the indissociable character of the past, the future, the inactual;
 - b. that of a temporal singularity insofar as the time of the narration is in an asymmetrical position in relation to that which would be the narrative of an allegory of time or the narrative of the concordance of time and action;
 - c. the time of the narrative can, by its very nature, be valid or not valid for other times - a given past, the past it has designated as a reference - or for all times.

(It may be recalled that Michel Butor's novel *L'Emploi du temps* is a good illustration of this kind of play.) From these three points, it can be concluded that the temporal representation of narrative is also an indifferent singularity. This representation can be precisely singular and not feign any reference to objective time. This singularity presupposes, as indicated by the three points that have just been evoked, an asymmetrical writing and reading of temporal representation. The latter is liable for numerous predications. (It suffices to recall the narrative and temporal strategies of Beckett.)

3. In terms of the representation of an action, narrative can no doubt be written and read according to the suggestion of Paul Ricoeur - narrative is *muthos* and ultimately close to the representation of the action proposed by classical tragedy and defined by Aristotle. In this perspective and in order to formulate these notations in other terms, the representation of an action, strictly understood, assumes that agents

react to situations, or act so as to reveal situations. It is, for instance, this relationship between action and situation that would account for the truth of representation in fiction. Here we come back, in fact, to the anthropological subject. But in this very hypothesis, we are again playing with asymmetry: the nomination or ascription of a given action, and the predication relative to this action. One knows that the narrative levels of a narrative, the technique of multiple points of view, are among the means of constructing this asymmetry. The representation of an action depends on the literary means used and on the construction of this representation as a metaphorical representation. There, again, it must be understood that the representation of the action is an indifferent singularity, in the sense that the narrative relates it and does not relate it to a paradigmatic predication.

From this rapid survey of the paradoxes of Paul Ricoeur, we can see that the literary narrative, considered apart from theses of a strict narratology, brings into play, in an exemplary manner, an internal play of asymmetric reference - both as far as the subject of the action represented is concerned and as far as the representation of time and the representation of action are concerned. This asymmetry can be given a rhetorical characterisation indissociable from the questioning contained in this asymmetry. This same asymmetry can be given a cognitive characterisation - the asymmetry sets in motion and brings to an end the play of cognitive representations in the narrative. This same asymmetry finally characterises narrative as this singularity that puts forward the hypothesis, that cannot be validated, of its own paradigmatic inscription. By this asymmetry, by the dualities and alternatives that it outlines, narrative makes meaning and can be precisely defined as a game of "telling" (translator's note: in English in the original text). The "telling" is both the action of recounting and the action of knowing what one is recounting. It is therefore only itself and its knowledge. This very knowledge sets in motion a game of predication. The "telling" assumes and maintains the asymmetry of the ascription and of the predication. The fictional narrative is characterised by a play on this asymmetry, which can be particularly free and far-reaching.

* Translated by Jill Daugherty and edited by Norman Strike, Romance Languages, Unisa.

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