

Response

Paul Ricoeur and Narrative Paradoxes

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The main concern in Prof Bessière's paper is to arrange some interplay and thereby show the analogies between narrative on the one hand, and metaphor on the other, as they are explored in Ricoeur's thought about those two verbal constructs. Ricoeur's thinking on narrative and metaphor (I personally think partly because he considers them to be verbal constructs only) gives rise to paradoxes (apparently logical contradictory statements, which I would like to add, provoke thought). Prof Bessière's attitude to these paradoxes is that he does not want to mediate between the two mutually exclusive terms or notations (this term has been used by Bergson, in order to designate a way of describing a phenomenon, by relating it to different sets of concepts) yoked together, nor does he want to achieve their dialectical resolution. He wants to conduct his argument and reflexion towards the attestation in Ricoeur's thinking of dualities which, in the course of the narrative and in the transfer of metaphor, occupy alternating positions. What is at stake in the narrative are the seemingly mutually exclusive notations of narrative as refiguration of global time on the one hand, and on the other the constructive nature of multiple times in the narrative. This duality is seen as analogous to the one which separates the identity of the agent of action from his variability, or even obliteration, in modern fiction. According to Bessière, the central paradox in Ricoeur's thought would be that he wants to relativise time and the identity of the agent, while at the same time endeavouring to show that narration is a valid solution to the unsolvable problems concerning time in phenomenology, and showing that the subject as an agent is identical to the anthropological subject. I would like to make two remarks which are meant to stimulate ulterior discussion. I think that Ricoeur's fundamental attitude in all he has been trying to do, has been a conciliatory one (in this instance, between the disintegration of the narrative and of the subject, as practised by deconstruction and the substantivisation of the subject or its hypostatisation, as is sometimes said). Ricoeur himself avoids dialectical resolution, by taking what he calls the long path of mediation which leads him through the forests of structural linguistics and

logical analysis. That is why he comes to treat fiction and metaphor primarily as verbal constructs. This approach seems to me to be very costly. Ricoeur himself has negotiated the passage from metaphor to fiction, and the term he uses in his essay on imagination in discourse and action is not duality, but "tension". This distinction is problematic. I prefer the latter term since it allows one to reflect on the concrete configuration of narration as rhythm. The term "tension" would also be useful when one reflects on Prof Bessière's notion of "indifferent singularity" of a narrative or of a metaphor. But as far as the mediation between hermeneutics and deconstructionism is concerned, it is important to note that Prof Bessière proposes the notation of the "mark" as a meeting place, a pivotal concept if I may say so. Prof Bessière affirms that the letter of the narrative (as letter) prevents the past from acceding to the vitality of its meaning. For me this is a problematic statement. First of all because there is a fundamental difference between Ricoeur's concepts of the trace and Derrida's. For the latter, iterability would be an essential predicate of the trace (thereby any thought of originality, of a surging up of meaning is negated) which is not the case in Ricoeur's way of reflecting on what a trace is. This point is central when one wants to reflect on what happens in a poem in general, and in a metaphor in particular. I refer here to the discussion between Derrida and Ricoeur as edited by Leonard Lawler in his *Imagination and Change*. A final remark about the narrative: Prof Bessière says that in Ricoeur's own terms, time is of Being, but it should be added that Being for Ricoeur is reducible not only to the Present (as is the case with Heidegger and after him Derrida) but is also an Act. Being as Act would be the ontological foundation of action.

The second part of the paper under discussion concerns metaphor. As Prof Bessière states, Ricoeur defines metaphor as a redescription of the world, redescription by virtue of an asymmetry between ascription (nomination) and predication. I would like to refer again to the important essay on imagination (between discourse and action). Ricoeur states here that images are said before being seen - this affirmation is comprehensible only if a metaphor or image is first a verbal construct, consequently discourse would engender the imaginary. In the case of the example discussed in the paper, "black milk", the image would be the result of this asymmetry of ascription and predication. A pre-existent substance would be falsely predicated. Therefore a "singularisation", as Bessière puts it, of milk, would take place by virtue of this defiguration. The asymmetry between ascription and predication would allow a play with or within alternatives. As an agent would alternatively be identical, different and non-existent, so would be the meaning of the metaphor, simple, ambiguous and non-existent or incomprehen-

sible. It would be incomprehensible unless it is understood as an allegory of the incomprehensible. But this example is not as simple and innocent in this case, since the image deals not immediately with a liquid but with a very old symbol in the judeo-christian tradition. This remark leads me to the concept which comes to the fore at the end of Prof Bessière's paper namely that of "indifferent singularity". I might be wrong, but the term "indifferent" belies in some way the heuristical function assigned by Ricoeur to fiction and to metaphor. As can be understood from the preceding remarks, Prof Bessière's paper contains food for thought and debate and I would like to thank him for that.