

## Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

### *Paul Ricoeur and Narrative: Context and Contestation*

MORNY JOY, editor

Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1997.

Morny Joy's worthwhile collection offers various interpretations of Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of narrative. The wide range of articles truly acknowledges the depth and width of Ricoeur's writings. These essays are an important contribution for anyone who is seriously interested in studying Ricoeur's work.

The contributors to this collection attempt to understand the narrative function in either Ricoeur's own writing or within a larger, multi-disciplinary context. As the title of this book suggests, various authors interpret Ricoeur by constructing his theory of narrative within a different context and, in some cases, by contesting various aspects of his theory. Both the shortcomings and virtues of narrative are presented as related to identity, historical reconfiguration, action, testimony, psychology, gender identity, ethics, politics, and the discourse of suffering. The context of this collection is as wide as the many implications that narrative has for a variety of disciplines and debates.

Readers will find in this collection a wealth of ideas related to the question of how much we ought to demand from a theory of narrative. Understanding and questioning the political and ethical dimensions (or lack thereof) of Ricoeur's writings on narrative is the guiding thread throughout the essays in this collection.

Readers will be delighted to find a thorough introduction by Morny Joy and "A Response by Paul Ricoeur." Ricoeur's brief response is a partial answer to the issues raised by various contributors. Ricoeur cautions readers and authors alike to be careful when ascertaining the practical implications of his writings on narrative and metaphor. He urges us not to "demand too much of a theory of metaphor or a theory of narrative, even when extended to the public sphere [for] it is within an ethics that we have to seek the reference to norms" (xliii). Ricoeur firmly states that "we must not ask of a theory of the imagination, even one completed by a narrative theory, both elevated to the collective plane, what can only be demanded of an ethics" (xliv).

The opening essay by Jocelyn Dunphy Blomfield, "From a Poetics of the Will to Narratives of the Self: Paul Ricoeur's *Freud and Philosophy*," is an excellent survey of the various narrative components found within Ricoeur's work from *Freud and Philosophy* to *Oneself as Another*. Dunphy Blomfield focuses on how Ricoeur's work concentrates on the "creative element" found in both the search for identity and the "semantics of desire" in psychoanalysis, and reveals the way in which hermeneutics is at work in these narratives.

Jamie Scott's analysis of Ricoeur's "The Hermeneutics of Testimony" (*Essays on Biblical Interpretation*) explores to what extent Ricoeur's narrative aspect of testimony remains in the service of judgment. Scott turns to Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* and reveals its dialectic of literary and literal

testimony (i.e., Bonhoeffer's actual writings and Bonhoeffer's actual sacrifice of his life). These testimonies are then understood as a form of witness to a greater truth. While interesting, this essay contains some sweeping claims that most readers will find overly general.

Graham Livesey's essay, "The Role of Figure in Metaphor, Narrative and Architecture," is among the less impressive essays in this collection. For one thing, Livesey's project is not as bold as it appears to be. Livesey sketches Ricoeur's development from the figure of metaphor to the form of *muthos* (plot). Focussing on the general creative element in narrative, Livesey compares this creative element to the work of an architect. While an architect transforms and marks the world in an obvious way, Livesey provides no good reason why architecture is an interesting or unique case of narrative creativity. Clearly, there are many professions (e.g., law, gardening, advertising, etc.) that are equally capable of transforming and reinterpreting the world. The substance of Livesey's essay could easily have been placed within a footnote of one of the more robust and thorough contributions in this collection.

Morny Joy's essay, "Writing as Repossession: The Narratives of Incest Victims," is one piece that readers will truly enjoy. Joy focuses on how narrative retelling is a way in which a self can mend its identity through gaining a different perspective on one's life and past. In discussing narrative retelling, Joy carefully treads between the certainty of modernism and what she views as the nihilism of postmodernism. Joy suggests that "strategic identity" is a concept that is indispensable to successfully understanding the delicate process of rebuilding selves in narrative. Her emphasis is on female incest survivors, and she is driven to make sense of their reconstructed narratives in the face of the postmodern disintegration of selves: "...just when it seemed that women were discovering what it was to have a self, to take responsibility for self-definition, to assume some form of autonomy, along came postmodernism and declared that there was no such thing as a self" (35). Joy's sources for her essay are both relevant and diverse, and she contributes a worthwhile and interesting point of view.

Pamela Anderson's essay, "Re-reading Myth in Philosophy: Hegel, Ricoeur and Irigaray Reading *Antigone*," begins with the author's disclaimer: "I am not a classicist, nor am I an authority on the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel or the feminism of Luce Irigaray. However, recently, my interest in reading the figure, Antigone, in Sophocles' ancient tragedy has been aroused—first—by Paul Ricoeur's 'Interlude' in *Oneself as Another*" (51). In applying Ricoeur's *Oneself as Another* to a reading of *Antigone*, Anderson focuses on the ways in which Ricoeur belongs to a "... modern male-centered tradition by reading this female figure of myth as disrupting the text" (xxx). Anderson shows how Ricoeur all too easily paints women into stereotypical and artificial roles. She then turns to Irigaray to find ways of narrating the various roles of women outside of standard categorizations. Anderson's claim that Ricoeur's narrative falls short of being

applicable and appropriate for women is definitely a criticism that even Ricoeur has heard and taken seriously (as evident from his brief "Response").

Henderikus Stam and Lori Egger concern themselves with the ramifications of Ricoeur's narrative theory of psychoanalytic discourse. Noting similarities between Ricoeur and David Carr, these authors argue that the concepts of "life" and "reality" need to be looked at more closely in order to understand how narrative might transform our lives. Stam and Egger put forward a very standard view of narrative psychoanalytic therapy, i.e., that reality is configured and transformed by a mutual dynamic between the patient and the therapist, where new and unanticipated possibilities are disclosed. While there is nothing on the surface that a reader can disagree with in this article, there is, unfortunately, no startling or new insights offered on narrative's relation to psychoanalytic discourse.

In "Women's Memoirs and the Embodied Imagination: the Gendering of Genre that Makes History and Literature Nervous," Helen Buss offers us a wonderfully refreshingly and creative piece that fuses together the two narrative genres of history and fiction. She focuses on the term "archive" and suggests that we understand the concept of imagination as yet another form of an "archive." Buss warns that until we understand the imagination as *embodied*, it is not possible to narrate and fully appreciate our imaginative acts. She argues that we must focus on the fact that we belong to our bodies even before we begin to tell stories. Buss succeeds in making it convincingly clear that Ricoeur has not fully incorporated the emotional and bodily aspects of a total lived existence into his writings on narrative.

Hermina Joldersma's article is an interesting thought experiment on the meaning of various late medieval religious song manuscripts. These manuscripts, depicting women's feelings and their experiences, seem to point to something beyond the world that these women inhabited. In Ricoeur's notion of narrative as a "thought experiment" Joldersma finds a way to interpret the meaning of these song manuscripts. With this in mind, Joldersma understands these manuscripts as imaginative variations of possible worlds. The focus on community identity is also apparent in the next two essays. David Brown shows a concern for understanding the collective identity of Latin-American seniors in a Canadian town, while Dominique Perron sets out to determine in what way Ricoeur's idea of narrative can be applied to the Québécois *l'identitaire*.

The relevance of Ricoeur's work on creating and maintaining a political identity is explored by Catherine Bryn Pinchin. Pinchin urges us to become critical of our acceptance of ideologies entrenched in our political identities, and to move beyond and challenge Ricoeur's acceptance of certain political conventions. Jim Fodor is equally sceptical of narrative's applicability to a larger worldview. Fodor claims that our values and identity cannot be properly understood by Ricoeur's theory of narrative, and argues that Ricoeur's project is far too abstract to account for culturally specific values and interpretations.

In "Ricoeur and Political Identity," Bernard Dauenhauer uses Ricoeur's difference between identity as *idem* and identity as *ipse* to contrast personal and political identity. Dauenhauer argues that we must maintain the distinction between *idem* and *ipse* in order to prevent the possible tyranny of a political narrative identity. Terrence Tilley's essay, "Narrative Theology *Post Mortem Dei*?" assesses the way in which Ricoeur's idea of narrative can be useful in creating a narrative theology for a postmodern age. Tilley's essay provides an engaging and interesting discussion of the changing face of ethics and theology, and also of how Ricoeur might help in configuring the badly needed subject who stands against the backdrop of this postmodern ethics and theology. In Robert Sweeney's essay, "Ricoeur on Ethics and Narrative," the ethical current found in Ricoeur's writing is highlighted and emphasized. He notes that ethics has always been a concern for Ricoeur, and explains that a deep connection exists between narrative and ethics. While Tilley's essay is a worthwhile read, Sweeney's contribution is neither insightful nor stimulating.

The final essay in this collection, Linda Fisher's "Mediation, *Muthos*, and the Hermeneutic Circle in Ricoeur's Narrative Theory," explores the key role that the hermeneutic circle plays in our narratives. This essay provides a rich and excellent discussion of the various ways in which the hermeneutic circle operates in a continual, circular, and dynamic manner. In emphasizing that we live through the stories that we create and create more stories in which to live, Fisher conveys the critical importance of the hermeneutic circle for Ricoeur's thought with exceptional ease and precision.

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***Power and Parenting: A Hermeneutic of the Human Condition***

KIERAN BONNER

New York: St Martin's Press, 1998.

This book draws on both classic political thinkers and contemporary writers on parenting. Its author is a sociologist who is influenced by Gadamer and Arendt. It is too narrow a volume to merit the subtitle "a hermeneutic of the human condition." Rather, the focus is on the nature and problems of parenting.

Bonner begins with a paradox. After slavery, the parent-child relationship represents the most complete and unlimited power that one human being can have over another. It includes the legal right to inflict physical pain while moulding a child can give one a powerful sense of efficacy. Yet parenting in our society leaves many parents feeling powerless. Children are now an economic burden, not an extra set of hands to work in the household or on the farm. They inconvenience

their parents in many ways, from the noise and mess of babies to the stress of worrying about teenagers who come home late. Moreover, along with the immense power of the parental role goes almost total responsibility. In our therapeutic age, we tend to blame parents if their offspring turn out to be less than well-adjusted adults. In having children, parents commit themselves to a role that lasts for at least a couple of decades, and is less reversible than almost any other adult role. It is no accident that many of those who decide not to reproduce call themselves "child-free," suggesting that being "tied to reacting to the actions of their children is precisely not to have freedom" (48).

Bonner suggests that the burdens of parenting are experienced with particular acuity by members of the affluent middle class in contemporary society. Such people have opportunities to exercise freedom and power in many areas of life. Yet they typically must cope with parenting without the help of an extended family, let alone the servants employed by the well to do in the past. Thus, it is the poor who are most likely to have children. Individuals who lack social power often find in parenthood an opportunity for power and influence that is not otherwise available (11). Those unable to work creatively in the public sphere can at least create future people, and those who cannot exercise authority in the world of adults can at least command the behavior of their children. Put in Nietzschean terms, one might say that having children is an impediment to the will to power of the strong, but a compensation and consolation for the will to power of the weak. This raises a couple of questions that are never addressed by Bonner. First, why analyze parenting in terms of power rather than love or caring? Second, is such a focus more typical of a fatherly rather than a motherly perspective? No doubt some feminists would want to develop this line of questioning into a thoroughgoing critique.

A central theme of *Power and Parenting* is its criticism of the Hobbesian view of power and the supposedly related bourgeois conception of parenting as a quest to produce super-kids and high achievers. Because the middle class makes its living through school-based learning and individual initiative (rather than inherited property or physical labor), the prompting and pushing of its children is especially intense (74). This reflects a Hobbesian conception of human potency in terms of accumulating resources rather than developing *phronesis* and a grasp of the common good (61). The bourgeois treat parenting as a mode of *poiesis* which calls for enhancing mastery and control. For illustration, Bonner discusses the educational ideas of Susanna Wesley (mother of Methodist revivalist John Wesley) and John Locke. Wesley believed in conquering the will of the child, and saw this as "the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education" (92). Locke sought to turn the child's inclinations to good purposes through methods which, though more sympathetic and gentle, were nonetheless manipulative. Bonner compares this to the "disciplinary power" of Foucault. The fact that it is not directly authoritarian makes such power harder to recognize and challenge

(109–110).

Bonner goes on to criticize contemporary parenting books such as Thomas Gordon's *Parent Effectiveness Training* and Burton White's *The First Three Years of Life*. Gordon urges parents not to rely on power and authority, but his methods are themselves ultimately manipulative. They foster a society in which parental authority is replaced by therapeutic negotiation. White urges parents to help children attain the maximum level of competence and to put this goal above all else. Such advice is characteristic of a society where workers must learn transferable skills in order to compete in the global post-industrial economy. But Bonner insists that the acquisition of competence must be balanced against other goals, such as learning social skills and respecting adults's needs not to be continually interrupted. Moreover, the very things cultivated in White's program—the quest for adoptable and flexible competence, for unconstrained learning and development—are traits that ironically lead grown children to choose a child-free lifestyle.

What is Bonner's parental ideal? Unfortunately, this is not presented with much concreteness or clarity. He talks about "developing practical wisdom" and seeing parenting as a "moral-practical activity based on *phronesis*, as opposed to ... a technical-productive activity assimilated to *poiesis*" (149). He refers to Arendt's concept of action, and says that we need to see parenting as a *praxis* done for its own sake rather than for the sake of a product, and to come to terms with the conditions of irreversibility and unpredictability which frame our action as parents. But I am not convinced that such insights are especially lacking in modern or bourgeois parents. If premodern children were not pushed to achieve, it was generally because they were born into a world with limited social options in which they were expected to labor from an early age. Wesley's insistence on conquering the will of the child also has a lengthy premodern genealogy, going back at least to Augustine's theology of original sin, if not to the biblical admonition not to "spare the rod." While Bonner is right in pointing out certain pathologies in contemporary parenting, the recommendation for "more *phronesis*" is not much of an answer.

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***Circulating Being: From Embodiment to Incorporation. Essays in Late Existentialism***

THOMAS W. BUSCH

New York: Fordham University Press, 1999.

As Thomas W. Busch notes in the preface to *Circulating Being*, existentialism has tended to be eclipsed in continental philosophy over the past few decades. Increasingly it takes on a somewhat historical appearance, a "pre" to the "posts"

that currently dominate discussion. Philosophies of existence are increasingly regarded as having provided valuable critiques of traditional metaphysics and epistemology, but as decidedly dated in the alternatives they afford for thought. Thomas Busch calls this into question in six concise studies of the writings of Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Judith Butler, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Ricoeur. These studies focus on later developments in existential thought in which earlier themes of embodiment, individuality, decision, and the limits of rationality are superseded by incorporation, language, and somewhat nascent forms of communicative ethics. It is in these later developments, Busch argues, that the legacy of existentialism properly lies.

Busch's approach in these studies is not one of antiquarianism but of hermeneutic and critical retrieval. Later existential thought, he argues, not only prefigures and makes possible several contemporary currents in continental philosophy but in many ways pronounces a powerful critique of such trends. It is a critique that emerges less from the standpoint of existentialism's earlier themes of lived experience and embodiment than from what Busch calls "'incorporation,' the transcendence of individual experience in the discursive circulation of Being, a circulation which, while admitting individual differences, calls discussants together ethically and politically" (x). Camus, Marcel, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty in particular converge not only in their critiques of rationalism or essentialism but in their "intimations of a communicative rationality which is also a call to shared communicative life" (x).

That Camus foreshadows postmodern philosophy in this and several other respects Busch ably demonstrates in his study of that author. In both his fictional and nonfictional writings, Camus examines notions of contingency, solidarity, difference, and the absurd which all have their postmodern counterparts. In Camus we find a conception of truth as intensely personal, the first truth being the absurd itself. The experience of the absurd creates a feeling of having been wronged or cheated, as a consequence of which one affirms one's desires and their worthiness to be fulfilled. As Busch writes: "my experience of the absurd, and my experience of being cheated, can lead to the further step that *all people's* desires, not just my own, ought to be fulfilled, which will produce then the conclusion that the absurd should be diminished not just in my life, but in all lives" (9). *The Plague* and *The Rebel* produce this conclusion by introducing a conception of community or solidarity that marks the transition from I to We. Camus's *Notebooks* and participation in the Resistance movement also give expression to a notion of community that would be central to his ethics and politics.

Busch's discussion of Marcel centers around the latter's distinction between primary and secondary reflection, a distinction central to Marcel's project of articulating participant experience. Primary reflection refers to an abstract, impersonal, and ostensibly value-free mode of thought of the kind associated with modern technology. Marcel contrasts this with secondary reflection which is

interpretive and situated within participatory perspectives. As Marcel writes: "Thought cannot go beyond existence; it can only in some degree abstract from it, and it is of the first importance that it should not be deceived by this act of abstraction" (30). Busch points out the central place of mystery in Marcel's thought, the recognition of which is not a resignation to the unknowable but "an essentially positive act of the mind" (33) which by necessity is derived from lived experience. Especially relevant to contemporary issues is Marcel's analysis of the I/Thou relation. Busch's description of this is especially relevant to students of Levinas and Gadamer: "The dialogical 'I' is decentered in its welcoming openness to and disposition to listen to the Other. Dialogue implies respect for an Other that transcends categories of having, instrumentality, reduction, objectivity, such that I experience in dialogue the 'hold' that the Other has over me" (38). Marcel sketches the outline of a communicative rationality and communicative ethics, both implications of the collapse of modern rationalism and of the necessarily interpretive nature of participant experience.

Busch describes late existentialism as "trac[ing] a path from passionate criticism of a modern reason inflated with pretension to certitude and assured of a license to dominate all forms of life, to a reason, now chastened by respect for finitude and, as inherently communicative, inextricably ethical" (127). The embryonic communicative ethics that Busch detects in Camus, Sartre, Marcel, and Merleau-Ponty (one could mention Karl Jaspers in this connection as well, a thinker who receives curiously little mention in this book) foreshadows the ethical theory of Jürgen Habermas while avoiding some of the pitfalls of the latter, not least of which are its arid formalism and forgetfulness of its own finitude. On existential premises, Busch remarks, strong conceptions of distanciation of the kind Habermas invokes are precluded, bringing late existentialism into closer connection with Levinas than critical theory.

*Circulating Being* makes a convincing case for a fresh look at later existentialist thought. While postmodern thinkers may have superseded them in certain respects, the writings of Camus, Marcel, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty are far from ready for consignment to the dustbin of history, but remain capable of pronouncing an incisive critique of both traditional metaphysics and epistemology as well as some more recent developments in continental thought.

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