

Paul Ricoeur on Refigurative Reading and Narrative Identity

HENRY VENEMA *Messiah College*

ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the relation between personal identity and story telling. In particular I examine how Paul Ricoeur links narrative discourse to identity formation. For Ricoeur stories are not simply aesthetic objects disconnected from experience, but are rooted in the very fabric of life and have the capacity to profoundly refigure our world. Narrative discourse and life are for Ricoeur dialectically tied to each other through a "mimetic arc." This, however, poses interesting problems and difficulties. How do stories affect the transformation of experience? According to Ricoeur the identity of the text can be incorporated into my own personal and communal identity through a mode of analogical transfer. This is the art of interpretation, the art of selfhood, the performative process of becoming a self in relationship with others.*

RÉSUMÉ: *Cet article analyse la relation entre identité personnelle et le fait de raconter une histoire. J'aborde en particulier le lien entre le discours narratif et la formation identitaire, tel que le conçoit Ricoeur. Pour ce dernier, les histoires ne sont pas simplement des objets esthétiques détachés de l'expérience; elles sont plutôt ancrées dans le tissu même de la vie, et ont le pouvoir de refigurer profondément notre monde. Le discours narratif et la vie sont, dans la pensée de Ricoeur, liés de façon dialectique par un «arc mimétique». Une telle façon de voir soulève, cependant, des questions et des difficultés intéressantes. Comment les histoires affectent-elles la transformation de l'expérience? Selon Ricoeur, l'identité du texte peut être intégrée dans ma propre identité personnelle et collective par un mode de transfert analogique. C'est en cela que consiste l'art de l'interprétation, de l'ipséité, le processus performatif du devenir de soi en relation avec les autres.*

Reading stories to my five year old daughter is part of my household evening routine. It matters little if a particular selection of Berenstain Bears has been read at least a hundred times, hearing it once again never bores her. Even before I read the story she often knows what to expect, the narrative order has

been fixed in her mind. My surprise with her unending capacity to remember the details of the story is only outdone by her sheer joy with recognizing words, and learning how to read. With each new book, I am witness to the transformation of my daughter's world. I can literally see in her face and with her relaxed excitement that something is happening to her. As I drift off the sleep during the third or fourth book, my daughter's elbow insists that I finish the story and bring it to completion. Her mind soars through the repetition and novelty of each page, but her ever expanding imaginative adventure needs the temporary familiarity of narrative closure. This is not the closure of logical necessity; rather, stories come to an end through narrative necessity, through the completion of the events that are needed to tell the point of the story. Something is communicated, something happens through the reading of the story that cannot be reduced simply to the transference of information. Reading transforms our imagination, refigures our world of experience, and contributes to the narrative texture of our identity, our sense of self. Now if this can happen with the Berenstain Bears, imagine what will happen when my daughter reads Shakespeare, Sartre, or Scripture.

It is this aspect of reading stories that I want to focus on. What is the affective relation between a narrative text and a reader? and how do stories function in the formation of personal identity? If, as I believe to be true, the journey of self-discovery is brought to language through narrative discourse, then one could also argue that the task of becoming a self, is not only given articulate shape through narrative language, but is constituted through the narrative mode of discourse itself. In other words, coming to terms with who I am not only takes place through the construction of personal narratives; but, I come to understand myself as a character within the stories I tell about myself, and I see possibilities for being other-wise in the stories of others. Reading opens my world to endless possibilities, to variations of self that I can assume as-if they were real. I can imagine myself as a character within a story because I too am a character within my own story. I can identify with narrative characters because my identity is inherently narrative in structure. It is this interplay between the story and reader as developed by Paul Ricoeur that I want to reflect on in this paper.

Narrative and Narrative Identity

In his magnificent three volume work *Time and Narrative* (1984-88),¹ Ricoeur launches a complex and detailed analysis of the interconnection between narrative discourse and human experience. Claiming that the narrative function is "the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience,"² Ricoeur carefully shows how the narrative mode gives the otherwise unintelligible diversity of human actions

and experience unity and order, albeit the unity of the story and the order of the plot. Even though Ricoeur insists that these three volumes are dedicated to revealing this necessary correlation between narrative and experience, a correlation where experience "becomes human to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative," and conversely where narrative "is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of ... experience,"³ the true purpose of *Time and Narrative* remains somewhat hidden. It is only at the end of the third volume of *Time and Narrative* that the primary purpose of the whole work is revealed:

Here is the core of our whole investigation, for it is only within this search...by individuals and by the communities to which they belong, for their respective narrative identities...that the aporetics of time and the poetics of narrative correspond to each other in a sufficient way.⁴

This revelation is quite remarkable if one considers that the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* are more than eight hundred pages long and that the only thematic treatment of the concept of narrative identity in *Time and Narrative* spans a mere four pages and seems to be an after-thought in response to lingering problems that Ricoeur's investigations on narrative have been unable to resolve.⁵

Astonishing as this may seem, the quest for identity should come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Ricoeur's work. Forever in search of the core of human creativity, Ricoeur has explored the multiple ways in which creative discourse brings experience to language. Whether it has been the exploration of sign, symbol or myth, the language of confession or regression, the power of metaphor to see reality in an entirely new way, or the ability of narrative to hold our experience together, Ricoeur has always been in search of an answer to the question "Who?", who am I that I can be spoken of in so many different ways. The problem of narrative identity, as developed in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative*, is just one more variation of the question "Who?". Narrative, like all the other forms of creative discourse, brings experience to language, but in this case it is the experience of temporality and action. Narratives construct worlds of possibility where agents are subjected to change and subject others to change in search of their identity.

The events of our collective stories form a vast diversity of interweaving texts out of which we try to construct a meaningful narrative account of who we are in relation to others. The difference and otherness of the received past is taken up through the imaginative process of emplotment, or story making, and given order and meaning in relation to our quest for identity. To search for one's identity is to accept responsibility for one's own past in relation to

one's present "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation" for the future;⁶ it is an attempt to form a narrative whole from the diversity of events that I as an agent both carry out and suffer. For Ricoeur:

this narrative interpretation implies that a life story proceeds from untold and repressed stories in the direction of actual stories the subject can take up and hold as constitutive of his personal identity. It is the quest for this personal identity that assures the continuity between the potential or inchoate story and the actual story we assume responsibility for.⁷

The search for identity is tied to the received past, but requires the past to be given a configuration marked with a stamp of ownership. Our fragmented storied past must be given a linguistic form that will have the power to refigure our experience as we construct our personal and collective identities. It is an interpretive process which begins with what Ricoeur calls "prefigured experience" and ends with the "refiguration" of our experience: it is both receptive and creative. The narrative function is a work of imagination that constructs unifying plots which give linguistic form to the mediation that takes place between the lived diversity of temporal experience and the unifying moment of action.⁸ By organizing historical events into a narrative unity, communities and individuals can offer testimony of who they are and how they wish to mark their existence in the world. This process of emplotment, which moves from prefiguration through configuration to the refiguration of experience, offers practical proposals for living, prescriptions for identity which when taken up become constitutive of one's own identity through the deliberation of decision, the commitment of choice, and the initiative of action. What narratives offer are imaginary linguistic models or configurations for living that become identifiable with who we are through the reconnection of narrative and life, that is, through the refiguring reconnection of the world of the text to the world of the reader.

While crucial with regard to his argument, Ricoeur readily admits to the difficulties posed by the intersection and reconnection of narrative and life, and it is a problem that is not lost to his critics.⁹ Ricoeur argues that the connection between narrative and temporal experience is not accidental but "presents a transcultural form of necessity."¹⁰ Narrative and experience are linked by the operative power of the "mimetic arc" of interpretation.¹¹ The interpretation of the temporal world of human experience takes place through narrative configurations which are shaped by pre-narrative structures and are completed by their return to the world of the reader. This is the significance of the process of narrativization. Narrative mediates between the

sedimentation and innovation of the practical field of human experience. Ricoeur writes: "My thesis is that the very meaning of the configuring operation constitutive of emplotment is a result of its intermediary position between the two operations I am calling mimesis1 and mimesis3."¹²

By choosing the term "emplotment" Ricoeur hopes to capture the dynamic character of the relationship between experience and narrative. The construction of stories is but one moment of the "arc of operations by which practical experience" is understood.¹³ The configuring act of narration begins with "a preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character";¹⁴ but, it finds fulfillment in the "application" of the referential intention of the story in the life of the reader or listener. "It is the task of hermeneutics...to reconstruct the set of operations by which a work lifts itself above the opaque depths of living, acting, and suffering, to be given by an author to readers who receive it and thereby change their acting,"¹⁵ and in so doing changes and fulfills its meaning. The term "emplotment" signifies an intimate and necessary connection between the stories we tell about ourselves and the structure of human experience from which narratives arise and to which they return. Narrative discourse is for Ricoeur a reflective way station, or critical moment of distancing, which, while ontologically rooted in the practical world of experience, allows for the imaginative variation of what is received in order that narratives may refigure or reorganize experience into more meaningful patterns. For Ricoeur the ultimate significance of the connection between narrative and life is found in the analogous transferability of the identity of the text to that of persons and communities by way of refigurative reading.

The difficulty of this position is readily admitted by Ricoeur. Although narrative identity is proposed as a poetic resolution to the problems of narrative and experience, "narrative identity is not a stable and seamless identity."¹⁶ The "application" of the narrative unity of a text to personal identity is far from a simple act. There is no single text; yet, there is an agent who must appropriate narrative meanings to form his or her identity not just as one text among others, but as living story that reflects my identity.

The selection of significant meanings, which are to become representative of who I am, involves a highly complex procedure spread out over the course of my life. Compounding this difficulty is Ricoeur's assertion that life can never offer "total mediation."¹⁷ Narrative identity is "an open-ended, incomplete, imperfect mediation, namely, the network of interweaving perspectives of the expectation of the future, the reception of the past, and the experience of the present, with no *Aufhebung* into a totality where reason in history and in reality would coincide."¹⁸ There is no meta-narrative that can totalize my experience. Narrative identity is an identity of plurality, of many stories. "Just as it is possible to compose several plots on the subject of the

same incidents...[as for example the four Gospels] so it is always possible to weave different, even opposed, plots about our lives."¹⁹ Ricoeur is convinced that within his concept of identity lies a diversity which no amount of narration can paper over and place under a unifying rule. "Narrative identity thus becomes the name of a problem at least as much as it is that of a solution."²⁰

Refiguration Through Receptive Reading

Narrative identity tries to bridge a gap between language and life by completing the world of the text in and through the world of the reader. Understanding is incomplete, wooden, bereft of life, without the transfiguration of the world of the one who tries to understand. Hence, reading is, according to Ricoeur, an act of reception that is "undividedly revealing and transforming."²¹ Reading is a work of application. "It is only in reading that the dynamism of configuration completes its course. And it is beyond reading, in effective action, instructed by the works handed down, that the configuration of the text is transformed into refiguration."²² While reading marks the path of narrative application for the initiation of meaningful action, it also marks the "intersection" that gives the "work of fiction...[its] significance."²³ The relation between the "fictive world of the text and the real world of the reader" requires "the phenomenon of reading...[as] the necessary mediator of refiguration."²⁴ One must be able to "imagine that"²⁵ the temporal world of the reader can be "seen as" the world of a narrative text in order to innovatively refigure one's own experience. Both historical and fictional narratives refigure experience under this rule of analogy, that is, under the rule of emplotment governed by the logic of metaphor which reconnects art to life through the transformation of "seeing as" into "being as."

This task of narrative refiguration requires an act of productive imagination that interactively constructs the meaning of the text. While the rhetorical force of the text *affects* the reader, the interaction between the world of the text and the world of the reader calls for an *active* response on the part of the reader. As Ricoeur explains, "this being-affected has the noteworthy quality of combining in an experience of a particular type passivity and activity, which allows us to consider as the 'reception' of a text the very 'action' of reading it."²⁶ The effect of the rhetoric of persuasion on the reader is passive; the meaning of the text's world results from the productive activity of imaginative reading.²⁷

To account for this duality within the act of responsive reading Ricoeur employs the work of Wolfgang Iser and Roman Ingarden.²⁸ In particular, Ricoeur focuses on Iser's appropriation of Ingarden's concept of the incomplete nature of literary texts: incomplete with regard to "image-building

concretization," and with regard to the world of the text.²⁹ Since the text requires a reader to activate the literary intention of the "sequence of sentences," thereby changing the fulfillment of the literary intention each time the story is read, Iser concludes that the text must have a "wandering viewpoint".³⁰ This concept "expresses the twofold fact that the whole of the text can never be perceived at once and that, placing ourselves within the literary text, we travel with it as our reading progresses."³¹ The indeterminate nature of the viewpoint reveals a dynamic relationship comparable to the act of emplotment. Reading is "a drama of discordant concordance" in which the attempt to "concretize" the "image of the work" fluctuates between the extremes of a complete "lack of determinacy [and]...an excess of meaning."³² In "this search for coherence" the reader oscillates between the "illusion" of complete familiarity and:

the negation resulting from the work's surplus of meaning, its polysemanticism, which negates all the reader's attempts to adhere to the text and to its instructions...The right distance from the work is the one from which the illusion is, by turns, irresistible and untenable. As for a balance between these two impulses, it is never achieved.³³

Reading is a "vital experience"³⁴ that calls for readers to concretize the image of the text through the refiguration of their own experience. Never static, every act of reading enters into a dynamic exchange between the configured structure of the text and the imaginative world of meaning, either to fall prey to its persuasive force and succumb to the illusion of familiarity, or to appropriate some portion of its polysemanticism in order to "transform" experience. The act of reading lives within this dialectic of "freedom and constraint,"³⁵ that is, within the space of imagination which Ricoeur continually describes as the interplay of activity and passivity.

According to Ricoeur, this act of receptive reading must also be understood in conjunction with the "public reception of a work."³⁶ Although every act of reading is an individual response, the meaning of the text is always understood by individuals in community with other readers and the traditions within which they read. Each generation responds to a text through its own "logic of question and answer,"³⁷ hoping to find a "solution for which they themselves must find the appropriate questions, those that constitute the aesthetic and moral problem posed by a work."³⁸ This is properly the "Wirkungsgeschichte" of the text, to use here Hans-Georg Gadamer's term. In this way, the relationship between an individual and a community of readers opens subjectivity to a different dimension of otherness. To understand a text is to gain "knowledge" of another world of reference in conjunction with other

readers.

The goal of reading in community with others is to effect a response that produces not only an intelligible configuration of the text, but more significantly, the refiguration of experience by way of intersubjective knowledge. To truly understand a text is to bring it to completion in life; therefore, "application orients the entire process teleologically."³⁹ Rather than leaving the reader with an abstract "recognition of the text's otherness,"⁴⁰ Ricoeur argues that the process of narrativization must overcome this difference by constructing a sameness or identity between text and reader. Using Hans Robert Jauss' triadic distinction between "*poiesis*, *aisthesis*, *catharsis*," Ricoeur explains that the aesthetic pleasure received from the actualization of the world of the text, if it is to return to the living world of the reader, must move beyond aesthetic experience to a cathartic effect "that is more moral than aesthetic: new evaluations, hitherto unheard of norms, are proposed by the work, confronting or shaking current customs."⁴¹ The cathartic effect releases the reader from the imaginative world of meaning to clarify experience by means of the moral instruction that reading has produced. This is the key to Ricoeur's concept of refiguration. "Thanks to the clarification it brings about, catharsis sets in motion a process of transposition, one that is not only affective but cognitive as well, something like *allégorèse*, whose history can be traced back to Christian and pagan exegesis."⁴² To refigure experience is to draw an *analogy* between text and reader. Reading does not merely extract moral content from the configuration of the text, but attempts to forge a conjunction of identity between text and reader. This transposition of new evaluations and norms requires that the reader actualize them in the intersubjective world of agents and patients. The reader must identify with, and take responsibility for, the cathartic effect which impacts on the moment of initiative and action, the moment which defines who we are. In other words, the narrative arc is completed with an allegorizing application of the world of the text in the immediate world of the reader; this process is not secondary to the meaning of the text, it is inseparable from textual meaning. And since the narrative arc forms the necessary means for understanding experience, to understand the text is to make one's own subjectivity identical with that proposed by the text. This is not only an identity with regard to the content of the text, but the very structure of the text becomes identical with the reader through cathartic application. *Seeing oneself* as that proposed by the text becomes, by means of choice and action, *being oneself* as that proposed by the text. Refiguration transforms more than moral evaluations, the very identity of the one who accepts responsibility for his or her actions configured by the world of the text becomes transformed by the possibilities the world of the text proposes.

Reading allows for the analogical transfer of the configured lesson of the text to the reader. Through the distance the imagination takes from experience, the human world of action is transformed under the refigurative power of reading itself. As Ricoeur explains, "reading appears by turns as an interruption in the course of action and as a new impetus to action."⁴³ It is both a "stasis and an impetus" to take distance from, and to act in the world of human action and suffering. Reading opens an imaginative space within experience to affect experience. In this imaginative world an analogous connection is made between the identity of texts and that of persons, a space within which the imagination is reconnected with life in order to initiate new action, a new beginning: "to begin to continue — a work has to follow."⁴⁴ The beginning of action initiates the transition from a world of possibility to the actual work of identity formation by an agent who must assume responsibility for what is done. Refigurative reading is a "provocation to be and act differently... through a decision whereby a person says: Here I stand!"⁴⁵ this is who I am, and this is what I have done! I am the one who is willing to accept responsibility for this action!

But if this space of imagination and experience is the place where personal and communal identity is formed, the place where I am supposed to exchange my ego for a self disciplined by the other, who is this "I" that takes a stand here? Who is this "I" that wills to be constant in relation to another? Who is this story about, myself, the self, oneself, my ego, my subjectivity, my identity, or "oneself as self-same [*soi-même*] (ipse),"⁴⁶ that is "self-constant" selfhood?⁴⁷ For Ricoeur, in *Time and Narrative*, the "Who?" remains without a clear answer. While I may identify with many texts as well as reject many others, and while I may rewrite my own identity through narrative discourse, this task is never complete.

So what is the end does Ricoeur have to tell us about who we are? Well, not very much, and rightly so. Ricoeur can't nor should he have anything to say about who I am; only I can and those who know me. Selfhood is a practice, a project, a performative process for which I can give a semantic or narrative account. But only you can tell me your story and I can tell you mine. While Ricoeur is indeed correct that our stories are incomplete narrative renditions of condensed series of events, of significant moments, and pivotal meanings in relation with others, it requires me to offer my fragmented story as a practice towards selfhood. This is me proud father who shares stories and breaks words with his daughter. This is me who finds self-defining meaning in tender moments of intimacy with one of my beloved others, this very particular other, this five year old giggling and demanding other. This fragment of my story, of intimate story telling, a story of shared stories, is a moment of repetition shared with every other who has read a story to their child. Is this who I am, is this what it means to practice selfhood? Well it

certainly part of my story of selfhood, a short story of mystical connection, of communion and love which I need to continually tell to myself. A refigurative story which I need to creatively repeat, to tell to myself again and again, in order to transform my *seeing* myself as this image of intimacy, into *being* an intimate other for my significant others.

Notes

- 1 *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1. Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984. *Temps et récit. Tome I* (L'ordre philosophique). Paris: Seuil, 1983. *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 2. Trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985. *Temps et récit. Tome II. :a configuration dans le récit de fiction* (L'ordre philosophique). Paris: Seuil, 1984. *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988. *Temps et récit. Tome III. Le temps raconté* (L'ordre philosophique). Paris: Seuil, 1985. (Here after referred to as TN 1, TN 2, and TN 3).
- 2 TN 1, p. xi.
- 3 TN 1, p. 3.
- 4 TN 3, p. 274.
- 5 In a footnote to the conclusion of the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* Ricoeur writes that "these conclusion might have been called a Postscript. Indeed, they are the result of a rereading undertaken almost a year after finishing the manuscript of this third volume of *Time and Narrative*. Their composition is contemporary with the final revision to that manuscript" (TN 3, 331, fn. 1).
- 6 TN 3, p. 208.
- 7 TN 1, p. 74.
- 8 The unifying moment of action is described by Ricoeur as "initiative." Here action forms the identity and being of the agent: "I act (my being is my doing)" (FTA 217). Yet as we shall see, it is unclear what sort of being this description of initiative brings to light: a description of agency, identity, or selfhood? See TN 3, 230-233.
- 9 In particular David Carr (1986) finds Ricoeur's understanding of narrative to be a literary artifice that subjects experience to narrative rules rather than seeing the temporal features of experience as constitutive elements for narrative composition. For further discussion see # 4.3.
- 10 TN 1, p. 52.
- 11 TN 1, p. 52.
- 12 TN 1, p. 53.
- 13 TN 1, p. 53.
- 14 TN 1, p. 54.
- 15 TN 1, p. 53.
- 16 TN 3, p. 248.
- 17 TN 3, p. 207.
- 18 TN 3, p. 207.
- 19 TN 3, p. 248.

- 20 TN 3, p. 249.
- 21 TN 3, p. 158.
- 22 TN 3, p. 158-9.
- 23 TN 3, p. 159.
- 24 TN 3, p. 159.
- 25 TN 3, p. 181.
- 26 TN 3, p. 167.
- 27 TN 1, p. 78.
- 28 On the emphasis on reading over the last 25 years see Umberto Eco,
"Intentio Lectoris: The State of the Art," in *The Limits of Interpretation*
(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 44-63.
- 29 TN 3, p. 167.
- 30 TN 3, p. 168.
- 31 TN 3, p. 168.
- 32 TN 3, p. 169.
- 33 TN 3, p. 169.
- 34 TN 3, p. 169.
- 35 TN 3, p. 177.
- 36 TN 3, p. 171.
- 37 TN 3, p. 172.
- 38 TN 3, p. 173.
- 39 TN 3, p. 174.
- 40 TN 3, p. 175.
- 41 TN 3, p. 176.
- 42 TN 3, p. 176.
- 43 TN 3, p. 179.
- 44 TN 3, p. 230.
- 45 TN 3, p. 249.
- 46 TN 3, p. 246.
- 47 TN 3, p. 247.