

Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutics of the Beauty of Unpredictability

Introduction

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Thinking with Paul Ricœur is a great pleasure and an even greater challenge. The more we seem to understand his life project, the more perplexed we are when facing the inescapability of the incompleteness, incomprehensibility, and impenetrability of what calls for thinking. Ricœur remains a faithful companion on the way to understanding oneself and reaching the inaccessible, despite the unprecedented progress of psychology, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and religion.

The phenomenon of the journey has always fascinated thinkers and poets. There is something intrinsically unprogrammable about being a *homo viator*, in its essential indiscernibility for an instrumental reason. When I was recently travelling through Umbria, mesmerized by its beauty and charm, I had the privilege of meeting people who welcomed me in an overwhelming spirit of hospitality, helping me, like the Greeks, to find my way around by saying, “κάτω κύριε κάτω,” “that way, sir, that way.”¹

In a perfect mixture of the seriousness of academic debate and the intoxication of Dionysian surrender to the sheer enjoyment of life (*la preziosa collaborazione*), we discussed Plato, Greek poetry, Italian politics, the inquietude of the soul, and anxiety for the future (*non abbiate paura*). There was no way that we could not have returned to the young Heidegger's philosophical project marked by existential uncertainty (*Unsicherheit*) and inner strife (*Zerrissenheit*), which benefited so greatly from his reading of

1. Zbigniew Herbert, “Prayer of the Traveler Mr. Cogito,” in *Collected Poems 1956–1998*, trans. Alissa Valles and Peter Dale Scott (New York: Ecco, 2007), 347.

Augustine. “Mihi quaestio factus sum” (*Confessions* 10.33.50)² brings us to understanding ourselves as a question, particularly when engaging discursively with the temptation (*temptatio*) to run into the false happiness of an easy life (*falsa beatitudo*). It is Augustine who helps us to comprehend that the real understanding of ourselves as the being that we are, and the overcoming our own forgetfulness of who we are (*Selbstvergessenheit*), can happen only within the horizon of an ontological relationship to God. But to discover oneself in that existential relationship means to accept that we are a burden to ourselves: “Oneri mihi sum” (*Confessions* 10.28.39). This is because, for Augustine, we are too full of ourselves and not open to God, who, although transcendent, is most intimately within us. The Augustinian “inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te” (*Confessions* 1.1.1) is not a pious escape into religion, but the very expression of the direction the search for our self-understanding needs to take. On the way to our self-inspection and introspection, we discover an unavoidable reference to transcendence.

The Augustinian admission that we do not understand who we are, “nec ego ipse capio totum quod sum” (*Confessions* 10.8.15), reminds us that we are not transparent to ourselves. This lack of transparency is thematized largely and in detail by psychoanalysis. Augustine is full of fear of his very own enigmas, of which he may not even be aware himself: “multum timeo occulta mea, quae norunt oculi tui, mei autem non” (*Confessions* 10.37.60). Ricœur will pick up this essential struggle and make the subject of not being transparent to ourselves a major point in his hermeneutic anthropology:

The self does not know itself immediately but only indirectly by the detour of the cultural signs of all sorts which are articulated on the symbolic mediations which always already articulate action and, among them, the narratives of everyday life.³

There is no unmediated access to ourselves. Only through telling and retelling stories can we make sense of who we are. Thus, the creating of narratives, as something that allows us to see even some seriously disrupted continuity in respect of our self-understanding, is the way to discover our identity, as something always provisional, interim, and condi-

2. Augustine's *Confessions* are quoted according to the edition of James J. O'Donnell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

3. Paul Ricœur, “Narrative Identity,” *Philosophy Today* 35 no. 1 (1991): 80, doi:10.5840/philtoday199135136.

tional. This is also to delight in the charity we can exercise toward ourselves, constantly remembering that self-knowledge is self-interpretation, and as such is always an infinite task.⁴

In the dramatic tension created by hues and tones in the sky of Umbria, we were talking of Cavafy's "Ithaca,"⁵ a poem which has been a true companion to many great thinkers, artists, and also to us, as we mixed languages, emotions and life experience in order to understand what is happening in us, with us, and through us, when we understand. We humbled ourselves before the sky's grandeur, being enchanted yet intimidated by its voluptuous generosity. There was no reason to rush. As faithful disciples of Cavafy, we took seriously his invitation: "But do not hurry the journey at all"—"Αλλά μη βιάζεις το ταξίδι διόλου." We yearned for a long journey: "Να εύχεσαι νάναι μακρύς ο δρόμος." And my newfound friend Francesca, from Milan, with her thoughtful, gracious, and delightful brother Andrea, inspired me to read together Eugenio Montale's "Prima del viaggio":⁶

Prima del viaggio si scrutano gli orari,
le coincidenze, le soste, le pernottazioni
e le prenotazioni (di camere con bagno
o doccia, a un letto o due o addirittura un *flat*);
si consultano
le guide Hachette e quelle dei musei,
si cambiano valute, si dividono
franchi da escudos, rubli da copechi;
prima del viaggio s'informa
qualche amico o parente, si controllano

4. "Full articulability should not be deemed the final goal of psychoanalytic work in any event, for that goal would imply a linguistic and egoic mastery over unconscious material that would seek to transform the unconscious itself into reflective, conscious articulation—an impossible ideal, and one that undercuts one of the most important tenets of psychoanalysis. The 'I' cannot knowingly fully recover what impels it, since its formation remains prior to its elaboration as reflexive self-knowing. This reminds us that conscious experience is only one dimension of psychic life, and that we cannot achieve by consciousness or language a full mastery over those primary relations of dependency and impressionability that form and constitute us in persistent and obscure ways." Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 58, doi:10.5422/fso/9780823225033.001.0001.

5. Constantine P. Cavafy, "Ithaca," in *Collected Poems*, trans. Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 29–30.

6. Eugenio Montale, "Prima del viaggio," in *Satura II (1962–1970)*, in *Tutte le poesie*, ed. Giorgio Zampa (Milano: Mondadori, 1990), 390.

valige e passaporti, si completa
 il corredo, si acquista un supplemento
 di lamette da barba, eventualmente
 si dà un'occhiata al testamento, pura
 scaramanzia perché i disastri aerei
 in percentuale sono nulla;

prima

del viaggio si è tranquilli ma si sospetta che
 il saggio non si muova e che il piacere
 di ritornare costi uno sproposito.
 E poi si parte e tutto è O.K. e tutto
 è per il meglio e inutile.

.....

E ora che ne sarà

del *mio* viaggio?

Troppo accuratamente l'ho studiato
 senza saperne nulla. Un imprevisto
 è la sola speranza. Ma mi dicono
 ch'è una stoltezza dirselo.

Reading a poem and translating it into English is a hermeneutic exercise. The strategic need for a hermeneutics specifically of translation has been enlarged by the tornado of globalization, with all its unpredicted political and social consequences. We find ourselves situated in the horizon between familiarity and strangeness, and called to adopt a particular sensitivity toward and solidarity with the strange and the stranger. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of translation helps us to see the proximity of philosophy and translation.⁷ In fact, translation serves as a paradigm for hermeneutic philosophy. Reading Montale's poem in Italian and translating it into English was a congenial expression of hermeneutic hospitality toward the Other, who takes seriously yet happily into account not only who we wish to become, but who we really are. The actual challenge of translation is not fluency in any given language, but the ability and willingness to accept alternatives, modifications, and corrections. This challenge is the most demanding, but also the most promising aspect of the proximity between philosophy and translation. Translation is an interpretation, and interpretation requires a constant translation, a mi-

7. Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (New York: Routledge, 2006).

gration between the familiar and the strange without prescribing oneself to either one or the other.

“Before the Journey”

Before the journey the timetables get checked,
the connections, and stops, possible layovers
and bookings (for rooms with a bath or
shower, one bed or two, or even a suite);
the guides are consulted, Hachette or museum, and
currencies changed, sorting francs
from escudos, rubles from kopeks;
before a journey a friend or relative
is told, the suitcases and
passports checked over, the outfits
put together,
razor blades bought, a quick run
through the Will,
pure superstition,
plane crashes are rare indeed;

before

a journey one is serene, yet also feeling
that the wise stay at home and the pleasure of
the return costs over the odds.
Then one is off everything is O.K. and everything
is for the best and for nothing.

.....

Now, what becomes

of *my* journey?
I'd prepared all details with much care,
knowing not why. The unexpected
is the real hope. Yet they say don't be
foolish to admit it.

We can spend all our life preparing for the journey and never have the courage to get ourselves on the way. However, throwing ourselves into a travelling experience cannot be perceived as a remedy for a stagnant and boring life which lacks novelty. The perplexing praise of everydayness discloses painfully that everything is useless, since it does not bring anything essentially new. The excitement of discovering new things can-

not really be the main reason for life's journey. Opening ourselves to the unknown and unforeseen can transform our life into endlessly beautiful amazement (*un interminabile bellissimo imprevisto*). The evidence of miracles is necessary for the calculative mind. For the meditative mind, on the contrary, the absolute uselessness of the journey can surprise us with its boundless generosity and help us to discover that in our fragile condition as human beings we can hospitably receive ourselves and others into our own dwelling, always welcoming the difference and the blessings of the richness of the Other, also as oneself as the Other.

Education as a mode of life cannot be identified with a philosophy of life, when everything is programmed and controlled. A specifically Ricoeurian hermeneutics of education, which, in fact, can be perceived to be modeled on translation, does not call for a spontaneity that will programmatically end in chaos. However, it does not support a philosophy of life which focuses on predictability, certainty, and stability. The experimental repeatability of projected success cannot be subsumed into the superior value of a life project. Mondiale's essential unpredictability cannot be made into a way of life which will guarantee anything tangible. On the contrary, the poet encourages us to get ourselves on the way: the way on which we will discover the hope of our life as a project (Heidegger). The unexpected is the hope of our life. The perspective of returning home reminds us of the many turns we need to make on the way, while willingly exposing ourselves to the essential unpredictability of life and of what it holds for us.

"The unexpected is the real hope." The beauty of unpredictability permeates our life. The courage to ask questions, to overcome our hesitations about asking them, to linger with a question rather than providing hasty answers, is valuable in itself; its intrinsic meaning is independent from any didactic, moral or utilitarian function. Far from being yet another methodological assumption, asking questions, instead of being just *l'art pour l'art*, is a true expression of the inquisitiveness and restlessness of the human mind that marvels at the beauty and complexity of being a human being in the world as a condition of living in the fourfold of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals. The experience of dwelling in the fourfold situates us in relationship to ourselves, to others, and to the world. And this relationship nurtures us while transforming ourselves and the world in which we live. With Heidegger, we can say that "the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve." "Dwelling itself is always a staying with things. Dwelling, as preserving, keeps the fourfold in that with which mortals stay: in things."⁸ The culture of questioning is the culture of dealing with

reality, which always requires being close to what is there. Education is a matter of learning to see what is there and wonder, θαυμάζειν, to discover the origin of thinking in the basic disposition of the human being to ask questions. On the way to narrative configuration, we discover that there is a non-transferable task we are charged with in respect of our being-in-the-world: to discover and read what is in ourselves. Proust congenially put this task into words in *Time Regained*:

But to return to myself. I was thinking more modestly about my book and it would not even be true to say that I was thinking of those who would read it as my readers. For, as I have already shown, they would not be my readers, but the readers of themselves, my book being only a sort of magnifying-glass like those offered by the optician of Combray to a purchaser. So that I should ask neither their praise nor their blame but only that they should tell me if it was right or not, whether the words they were reading within themselves were those I wrote.⁹

Great narratives allow us to read what lies within ourselves, and thus offer a powerful form of assistance when it comes to dealing with the existential pain of lack of self-transparency and narratability. Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self and his notion of narrative identity remind us that the partial opaqueness and the incomplete account we have of ourselves are the true expression of the fundamental impenetrability of our being in the world as finite, historical, and lingual beings. Understanding ourselves, and being vulnerable and incomplete human beings, stresses the essential indisputability of the radical ethical responsibility we have to take upon ourselves. Hermeneutically speaking, to be a human being in the world means to be an ethical being. Thus, *existentia hermeneutica* is always *existentia ethica*.

The papers presented in this issue of *Forum Philosophicum* are an attempt to think with Paul Ricœur, to get into a hermeneutic conversation with a matter to be thought. Their authors join me in thanking the reviewers for their constructive readings of the papers in their originally submitted versions. The final texts are the result of a fruitful collaboration between authors, reviewers, and the editorial board of *Forum Philosophicum*. We are all grateful to *Forum Philosophicum* for this opportunity to

8. Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking*, in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 148 and 149 [GA 7, 152 and 153].

9. Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, trans. Stephen Hudson, vol. 7 of *In Search of Lost Time* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 415.

become engaged in a dialogue with different voices in Ricœurian scholarship, which we understand as a hermeneutic gesture that allows us to enter into a dialectic of question and answer. Our task is not to provide definite answers, but rather to remain in “a conversation that we ourselves are,”¹⁰ and which positions us within the horizon between fidelity and critique as fundamental to Ricœur’s phenomenological hermeneutics.

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10. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 2006), 370.