

A Hymn to Hope: Celebrating the Joy of Being Human in Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics of Narrative Discourse

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Life is not what one lived but what one remembers
and how one remembers it in order to recount it.

Gabriel García Márquez,
Living to Tell the Tale

Texts are commonly perceived as lifeless imprints of words; but for Paul Ricoeur, texts mean differently: texts are vessels of meaning. Texts are thresholds of pleasant discoveries. In reading the texts, the reader not only confronts the texts as written; he also encounters a *world*. The reader reads the texts and the texts engage the reader. In such an exchange, a horizon is opened up and the reader, through the texts, is able to understand, that is, understand himself. Through the *world* he discovers, the reader finds his own.

For Paul Ricoeur, understanding is self-understanding through one's encounter with texts. When one reads, he embarks on a journey, a journey which begins from self, detours into the world of texts then moves homeward to self once more. The journey from the self to the text and back constitutes the nexus of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of the narrative. Narrative mediates self-understanding for the reader. It allows the reader to see new possibilities of being self. For this reason, Ricoeur's philosophy has been described as

“hermeneutics of the self” and Ricoeur himself, a “philosopher of hope.”

The present essay entitled “A Hymn To Hope,” explores this aspect of Ricoeur’s hermeneutics – the narrative as a gateway of hope. By hope here, we mean, not the theological hope anchored on an other-worldly existence but hope as an affirmation of ever newer, ever fresher possibilities of being human. For Paul Ricoeur, every reading of the text is a reading into the “self.” It is a journey that allows us to discover our capabilities otherwise hidden from us by our superficial, day-to-day entanglement with the world. Our life must be read, that is, interpreted if we must experience life to the fullest. This is what narrative is for; this is also what we hope for – that we become more and more human as we go through the labyrinth of life.

On Discourse

Our philosophical reflection starts with Ricoeur’s notion of discourse.

Discourse happens when one intends to say something on something to someone.¹ By this definition, one could see the relational nature of discourse. One wishes to say something because one wants to relate, to communicate. Communication is a continuum, not of aimless words, but of meaning. On the other end is a person who receives this communication. In the act of listening, he opens himself up to meaning. This is the starting point of understanding.

This dynamic notion of discourse is elaborated by Paul Ricoeur in his essay *Language as Discourse*.² Ricoeur’s theory is a critique against what he terms as a “unidimensional approach to language” espoused by Ferdinand de Saussure and the structuralists.³ For de Saussure, language is either *langue* or *parole*. As *langue*, language

¹ Garcia, Dr. Leovino. “*Hermeneutics: Doing Philosophy with Social Sciences, Arts and Literature*”, p. 3. Hereafter, HDP.

² Ricoeur, Paul. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*. Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976, pp. 1-23. Hereafter referred to as IT.

³ IT, p. 6.

is seen as a code that is collective, synchronic, systematic and compulsory, anonymous and not intended. As *parole*, however, language is the message produced by the speaker and is viewed as individual, diachronic, arbitrary, contingent and intentional. Because of this, structuralists think language as *parole* cannot be scientifically investigated and thus for a long time, it is language as *langue* that sets the direction for the contemporary study of language. As a result, Ricoeur laments that: "Language no longer appears as mediation between minds and things. It constitutes a world of its own, within which each item only refers to other items of the same system, thanks to the interplay of oppositions and differences constitutive of the system. In a word, language is no longer treated as a 'form of life' as Wittgenstein would call it, but as a self-sufficient system of inner relationships."⁴ Treated only as *langue*, language loses its vitality and dynamism.

As a counter theory, Ricoeur proposes a two-dimensional approach to language. He invokes what he considers as two irreducible entities of language, namely, *signs* and *sentences*. This theory, he believes, will also help clarify the distinction between *semiotics* and *semantics*. *Semiotics*, he says, is "the science of signs"; it relies on "the dissociation of language into constitutive parts." *Semantics*, "the science of the sentence," on the other hand, is "immediately concerned with the concept of sense"; it is "defined by the integrative procedures of language."⁵ In presenting his theory, Ricoeur desists from using the term *parole* and used the term "discourse" instead. This is necessary in order to emphasize "the specificity of this new unit on which all discourse relies."⁶ This "new unit" is how Ricoeur describes the *sentence*. He finds in the sentence not just the combination of separate entities or signs but a "new entity." A sentence is made up of words but is more complex than the sum of words. A sentence is formed by signs but itself is not a sign. This is so because a sentence is the very event, the actuality of language.⁷ Dr. Leovino Ma. Garcia

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *IT*, p. 8.

⁶ *IT*, p. 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*

explains this further in his essay, *Hermeneutics: Doing Philosophy with Social Sciences, Arts and Literature*: "To say something, first of all, properly belongs to the sentence taken as a whole. The meaning is not attached to the isolated words but to the complex operation which makes up the predicative act. The meaning is the true meaning of discourse. Every event of discourse is a fleeting event but its meaning remains."⁸

Discourse, writes Ricoeur, is the event of language. What he wants to underscore in this statement is the temporality of language. As an event, a discourse is fleeting, transitory, vanishing. This is so unlike the concept of language as code or system where it is considered permanent, stable and unchanging. But not all in discourse is temporary. Words fade away but something continues to endure; something resists transformation. Ricoeur calls this permanent element of discourse the "propositional content" or the "said as such" or the "objective side" of the speech event.⁹ Discourse can function as predication¹⁰ because it bears not just the particular or the individual but what is also universal about the subject.

These characteristics of discourse as event and predication are in the heart of what Ricoeur calls dialectics of *event* and *meaning*. What exactly is this dialectics is best explained when Ricoeur says: "If all discourse is actualized as an event, all discourse is understood as meaning."¹¹ Discourse is not simply what was said but what was meant. What we try to capture is not what passes away but what endures, that is, the propositional content or the meaning. "It is not the event insofar as it is transient that we want to understand, but its meaning – the intertwining of noun and verb, to speak like Plato – insofar as it endures... It attests to the intentionality of language, the *noesis* and *noema* in it. If language is a *meinen*, an intending, it is so precisely due to this *Aufhebung* through which the event is

⁸ HDP, p. 4.

⁹ *IT*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁰ *IT*, pp. 10-11.

¹¹ *IT*, p. 12.

cancelled as something merely transient and retained as the same meaning.”¹²

Discourse, Text and the World

Ricoeur defines text as “any discourse fixed by writing.”¹³ Based on this definition, one would think initially that writing is but a consequence of oral speech, a sort of transcription or to use Ricoeur’s term, inscription, of what is being said. However, Ricoeur points out that, while writing as an institution is subsequent to speech, it is not however subservient nor dependent on the latter. It is not a handmaid of oral speech; it is rather its replacement. Writing is a new way of creating discourse. The definition of text as “any discourse fixed by writing” should not be construed as an identification of the written text with what is said. The contrary is true. Ricoeur explains: “What is fixed by writing is thus a discourse which could be said, of course, but which is written precisely because it is not said. Fixation by writing takes the very place of speech, occurring at the site where speech could have emerged. This suggests that a text is really a text only when it is not restricted to transcribing an anterior speech, when instead it inscribes directly in written letters what the discourse means.”¹⁴

It was already noted that the sentence is the basic unit of discourse.¹⁵ But Ricoeur also says that discourse can also take a form of something longer than a sentence. Discourse, says Ricoeur, is also work.¹⁶ By referring to discourse as work, he expands the notion of discourse from the category of *speech acts*¹⁷ to the category of *production and of labor*. This new category reveals yet another

¹² *IT*, p. 12.

¹³ Ricoeur, Paul. *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 145; Hereafter referred to as HHS.

¹⁴ HHS, p. 146.

¹⁵ *IT*, p. 7.

¹⁶ HHS, p. 136.

¹⁷ These speech acts are the locutionary act (saying something), the illocutionary act (what we do in saying something) and the perlocutionary act (the effect of saying something). See also *IT*, p. 14 or HHS, p. 134.

dimension of language, that is, "as a material to be worked upon and formed."¹⁸ Discourse becomes something that is given form (*composition*); that is codified according to a certain genre (*literary genre*); that produces an individual (*style*). The introduction of this new category brings discourse closer to *literature*. As a form of discourse, literature introduces an entirely new meaning for the word "reference." Literature transcends the narrow boundaries of ostensive, even descriptive references and opens the readers' eyes to a *world*. This is what makes literary texts *poetic texts*. By the term *poetic*, Ricoeur is not trying to subordinate all forms of literature under one particular literary genre. He is referring instead to the capacity of the text to "speak about the world."¹⁹ The *world* he refers to is not the situation which surrounds the dialogue between two persons. "For me," says Ricoeur, "the world is the ensemble of references opened by every kind of text, descriptive or poetic, that I have read, understood, and loved."²⁰

This *world* is also what Ricoeur calls "the world of the text."²¹ The "world of the text" is the reference of discourse. Ricoeur distinguishes between the so-called *first order reference* and the *second order reference*. The *first order reference* points to objects and things that are *ready-to-hand*, to use the term of Martin Heidegger. The *world* belongs to the second order reference, which points "not only at the level of manipulable objects but at the level that Husserl designated by the expression *Lebenswelt* (life-

¹⁸ HHS, p. 136.

¹⁹ *IT*, p. 37. Gadamer also writes of the world in relation to man's capacity to use language. He writes: "Language is not just one man's possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all. The world as world exists for man as for no other creature that it is in the world. But this world is verbal in nature... To have a world means to have an orientation (*Verhalten*) toward it. To have an orientation toward the world, however, means to keep oneself free from what one encounters of the world that one can present it to oneself as it is. This capacity is at once to have a world and to have language. The concept of world is thus opposed to the concept of environment, which all living beings in the world possess." See Gadamer, Hans-Georg. "Language As Experience of the World" in *Truth and Method*. New York, New York: Continuum, 1993, pp. 443. Italics taken from the text.

²⁰ *IT*, p. 37.

²¹ HHS, p. 140.

world) and Heidegger by the expression 'being in the world'.²² In the words of Ricoeur: "The world of the text is therefore not the world of everyday language. In this sense, it constitutes a new sort of distancing which could be called a distancing of the real from itself. It is this distancing which fiction introduces into our apprehension of reality. We said that narratives, folktales and poems are not without a referent; but this referent is discontinuous with that of everyday language. Through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality. Fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of power-to-be. Everyday reality is thereby metamorphosed by what could be called the imaginative variations which literature carries out on the real."²³

With his exposition of the *world* as the proper reference of discourse, Ricoeur also redefines the task of reading and hermeneutics in general. He thinks it is no longer possible to simply read or interpret the texts according to the meaning which the author has in mind as claimed by Romanticism.²⁴ The new task of hermeneutics is "to explicate the type of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text."²⁵ The meaning of the text is not an idea nor another person but a "pro-ject", that is, "the outline of a new way of being in the world."²⁶ When we read the text, when we interpret the text, we are actually treading along a new way of being human, of being ourselves.

Self-Understanding Through Narrative

With a *new theory of interpretation* goes hand in hand a *new theory of understanding*. The meaning of the text, as noted in the previous paragraph, is not *behind* the text but *in front* of the text.²⁷ Henceforth, to understand, Ricoeur asserts, is to

²² HHS, p. 141.

²³ HHS, p. 142.

²⁴ HHS, p. 46; see also p. 151.

²⁵ HHS, p. 141.

²⁶ *IT*, p. 37.

²⁷ HHS, p. 143.

understand oneself in front of the text. Understanding is none other than self-understanding. It is in this aspect of Ricoeur's thoughts that we see clearly the influence of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger was saying, specifically in *Being and Time*, that understanding is not just a mode of thinking but a mode of being; it is a structure of being-in-the-world. Understanding for Heidegger is a projection of our ownmost possibilities in the very situation where we find ourselves. Writes Heidegger: "Understanding is the existential being of the ownmost potentiality of being of Dasein in such a way that this being discloses itself what its very being is about."²⁸ This led Ricoeur to affirm that "the constitution of the self is contemporaneous with the constitution of meaning."²⁹

Understanding as self-understanding happens when someone makes meaning his own. This process of making something alien one's own is what Ricoeur calls *appropriation*, his translation of the German term *Aneignung*.³⁰ What is made one's own however is not a concept or idea or intention of another subject. It is rather a new mode of being or a self-enlarged. "The reader is rather broadened in his capacity to project himself by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself."³¹ The text is able to do this through the process called *distanciation*. For Ricoeur, *distanciation* is constitutive of the text as an autonomous entity.³² Once written, the text transcends the psychological, sociological or cultural, limitations that surround its writing. It has the ability to "decontextualize" itself in such a way that it can be 'recontextualized' in a new situation – as

²⁸ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. (Translated by Joan Stambaugh). Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, pp. 134-135. See also HHS, p. 142.

²⁹ HHS, p. 159.

³⁰ HHS, p. 185.

³¹ HHS, p. 192.

³² HHS, p. 139.

accomplished, precisely, by the act of reading.”³³ It is in the act of reading, says Ricoeur, that “the destiny of the text is fulfilled.”³⁴

The ability to open up a *world* is true not only for written texts, those so-called “written monuments”,³⁵ but also for other cultural “texts” in general.³⁶ Ricoeur compares these cultural texts and the written text with an icon. The dictionary defines an icon as image or likeness.³⁷ But the text as an icon is not a mere presentation of reality as it is. Ricoeur uses the term *iconic augmentation* to denote a certain degree of reconstruction applied to reality once it is inscribed by text. *Iconic augmentation* therefore is a re-writing of reality. “The inscription of discourse is the transcription of the world, and transcription is not reduplication, but metamorphosis.”³⁸ It is a way of presenting reality in a different way, “a revelation of a real more real than ordinary reality.”³⁹ The challenge is to find meaning beyond what is immediately visible. Whether painted, sculpted or wrought, we understand the text when we receive the world that it presents.

The theory of *iconic augmentation* anticipates, so to speak, the theory of *mimesis* which Ricoeur later on will develop and apply in his hermeneutics of narrative discourse.⁴⁰ Following Aristotle, Ricoeur believed that *mimesis* is not a mere imitation but a creative imitation or better yet, a “poetic activity”.⁴¹ When used in narrative, *mimesis* consists in the construction of plots

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ HHS, p. 164.

³⁵ HHS, p. 150.

³⁶ See “Refiguring Modern Philippine Art” and “Cartography as the Narrative Space: A Map Lover’s Discourse” by Dr. Leovino Garcia. The latter was published in *Budhi* 2 & 3, 2002, pp. 25-36.

³⁷ Oxford American Dictionary. Oxford University Press, 1980.

³⁸ *IT*, p. 42.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ See Ricoeur, Paul. “Time and Narrative: Threefold Mimesis” in *Time and Narrative*, Volume I. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, pp. 52-87.

⁴¹ HHS, p. 292.

and imitation not of events but of the meaning of events. Ricoeur writes: "*Mimesis*, in this sense, is a kind of metaphor of reality. Like metaphor, it places before our eyes, it shows by 'signifying the thing in activity' (Poetics, 1148a, 24). The effect here is similar to that in painting which, on the basis of an artificial alphabet of lines and colours, produces what Francois Dagognet calls, in *Ecriture et iconographie*, an 'iconic augmentation' of the real. Fictional narrative as well as is an iconic augmentation of the human world of action."⁴²

In his essay, *Life in Quest of Narrative*, Ricoeur presents a new way of seeing the link between life and fiction or what he terms as "the relation between narrative and life."⁴³ The common perception is that "stories are recounted and not lived; life is lived and not recounted."⁴⁴ This is true but only if one thinks that narrative is an enclosed text and life, a mere biological existence. Ricoeur wants us to think otherwise. Narrative is a text whose meaning is not completed in itself but in the reader⁴⁵ and life itself is not worth living unless interpreted.⁴⁶ What narrative offers us is that one glance through which we see the sense and meaning of things. By seeing ourselves through the imaginative variations of the narrative, we are able to see who we really are. Through narrative's configuration, our life is refigured. Narrative therefore, particularly fiction, has an indispensable role in finding the meaning of life. Writes Ricoeur: "...fiction, in particular narrative fiction, is an irreducible dimension of self-understanding. If it is true that fiction is only completed in life and that life can be understood only through the stories that we tell about it, then an examined life, in the sense of the word as we have borrowed it from Socrates, is a life recounted."⁴⁷

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Ricoeur, Paul. "Life in Quest of Narrative." On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation. Edited by David Wood. New York, New York: Routledge, p. 24. Hereafter referred to as LQN.

⁴⁴ LQN, p. 20.

⁴⁵ LQN, p. 26.

⁴⁶ LQN, p. 28.

⁴⁷ LQN, p. 31.

Synthesis

In the introduction of this essay, I intimated my intention to write on *hope* in the context of Ricoeur's hermeneutics of narrative discourse. Hope is a theme close to Ricoeur's heart.⁴⁸ Hope, for Ricoeur, is not a simple positive thinking which one can easily invoke in order to feel good; neither is it a promise of an easy-way-out. For Ricoeur, hope is intimately linked with being human. Hope is the way we are. It involves our ceaseless struggle to find meaning; to assert our capability over our culpability; to affirm sense over nonsense. Hope for Ricoeur is transcendence. It is an active search for the richer, fuller, deeper dimension of being human. It is in his affirmation of hope that we see the grandeur of Ricoeur's philosophy. For Ricoeur, philosophy should always aspire for a better understanding of human existence and that the philosopher's task is to understand, that is, to understand, "with increasing depth and vigor, the significance of being human."⁴⁹ Philosophy itself for Ricoeur is already an engagement in the act of hope.⁵⁰

In his hermeneutics of narrative discourse, Ricoeur gives us yet another way of hoping, of living our lives more humanely. Narrative is our bridge to hope. It is very easy to fall into the temptation of viewing one's life as a series of disparate and disconnected events. But through the mediation of narrative, through its creative configuration, we are able to see the connections, the so-called "coherence of life,"⁵¹ once the story is told and read. There can be no better way of defining hope than this – *a new way of being in the world, a new way of understanding oneself*. We experience hope when nonsense is won over by sense; when

⁴⁸ See Garcia, Leovino. "Paul Ricoeur: Philosopher of Responsibility and Hope." *Budhi* 2 (1997). pp. 129-137. Hereafter referred to as PRPRH.

⁴⁹ PRPRH, p. 129.

⁵⁰ Garcia, Leovino. "The Philosophical Exploration of Paul Ricoeur." *Budhi* 2 (1997), p. 152.

⁵¹ Ricoeur, Paul. "Narrative Identity." On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation. Edited by David Wood. New York, New York: Routledge pp. 194-195; hereafter referred to as NI.

discordance is displaced by concordance; when our myopic sense of reality is enlarged by “a vision of a good life”;⁵² when our sedimented identity is transformed by a “figured” self.⁵³ It is true, life is not worth living unless recounted. This is how Ricoeur paraphrased the original Socratic maxim: “An unexamined life is not worth living.” To say the same thing in Filipino: *Walang kwenta ang buhay na walang kwento*. Or better yet, *walang saysay ang buhay na hindi sinasalaysay*. □

⁵² Kemp, Peter. “Ethics and Narrativity.” *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*. Edited by Hahn, L.E. Illinois: Open Court, 1995, p. 387.

⁵³ NI, p. 199.