

Introduction to the Study of Religion

Discussion III: Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*

Sean Hannan

Hints from the Preface

Though you may've felt compelled to skip over it, there are some interesting tidbits to be found in Ricoeur's preface. For example: much like *Symbolism of Evil*, *Time and Narrative* is also part of a multi-volume project. Not only are there two more volumes of *Time and Narrative* itself (which we won't be reading), but there is also a sort of prequel: *The Rule of Metaphor*. More substantively, we can learn from the Preface that Ricoeur's understanding of narrative is related to his work on metaphor. Both, he says, are kinds of re-description that 'grasp together' elements which appear to us as far apart. This *grasping-together* (or 'comprehension') leads us to interpret those elements in new and meaningful ways, which were not obvious to us before the grasping-together took place.

Metaphor: two (or more) elements are put side by side to create a new *reference* that wasn't there in either of them beforehand.

E.g. "Love is a battlefield." (P. Benatar)

We have two elements: (1) love, (2) battlefield.

Grasping them together, we get: (3) there is some similarity in the ways love and battlefields strike us in our lived experience.

Narrative: two (or more) elements are put side by side to create a new *coherence* that wasn't there in either of them beforehand.

E.g. "The Allies won World War II because of their victory at D-Day." (some textbook)

We have two events: (1) D-Day, (2) the end of WWII.

Grasping them together, we get: (3) there is a *causal link* between D-Day and the official end of WWII (and we can tell the story of WWII by way of these causal links).

What does time have to do with narrative?

Ricoeur points out that the kind of 'grasping-together' we do when we compose coherent narratives doesn't necessarily match up with our temporal experience. At the very least, it seems that we could also characterize that experience as a dizzying array of disconnected events and sensations. Narrative would then be a kind of outside form that we would apply to our lives in time, so as to give them shape and meaning.

The main goal of Ricoeur's project is to see whether narrative is (a) something we impose on our lives in time or (b) something that is anticipated in our 'pre-narrated' experience of time. In other words: do we tell stories in order to make up for the meaningless jumble of our lives? Or do our lives happen to us as if they were already stories, at least potentially?

Augustine and Time

Ricoeur decides that the best way to get us to think of this relationship between time and narrative is to look at two classic texts that approach the relation from opposite ends. First, he walks us through Book XI of the *Confessions*, where Augustine of Hippo (a North African Christian who lived about 1600 years ago) dives into the confusing depths of ‘what time is’ and what it’s like for us to live in time. Later, Ricoeur will read Aristotle’s *Poetics* and try to derive from it a general sense of what the narrative representation of human life is all about.

Augustine’s account of time is fairly complex, but we can try to simplify it for our purposes here. His original question—“What is time?”—leads him down a rabbit hole, as he can’t seem to find any way that time really “is.” The past no longer ‘is,’ while the future ‘is’ not yet. The present, meanwhile, seems difficult to pin down. Whenever we say ‘now,’ there’s already a short span of time that, in principle, we can divide down further and further, infinitely. So it’s not clear if present time ‘is’ either; we might have some kind of slipperiness that’s hard to catch hold of, and consequently hard to explain.

And yet, as Augustine also points out, we talk about time all the time. We must have some kind of *pre-understanding* of how it works. We measure how much time things take, for example. As a consequence, there must be some way that we can ‘grasp’ time so as to make sense of it. But how does that ‘grasping’ of time go along with our feeling of being pulled along by the fluid current of time? There seems to be an awkward contradiction in our experience of time here.

It’s this awkwardness that Ricoeur wants to convey when he talks about *distentio* (pulling-apart) and *intentio* (holding-together) in Augustine. On the one hand, we are torn apart between past and future, unable to stop time or make sense of all the temporal things that happen to us at breakneck speed. But, on the other hand, we also have the ability to remember and anticipate things, and so to interact with the temporal world—we aren’t totally out-of-sorts in time.

There are two main things that Augustine doesn’t really give us: (1) a final winner in the contest between ‘pulling-apart’ and ‘holding-together’ in time (although he seems to think that ‘pulling-apart’ is the likely favorite); and (2) a fuller description of how we ‘put things together’ in time so as to tell stories about our lives. For those kinds of issues, Ricoeur looks to Aristotle.

Aristotle and Narrative

The two key terms for Ricoeur’s reading of Aristotle are *mythos* (employment) and *mimesis* (imitation or representation). Ricoeur thinks that Aristotle has given us a fuller description of how we ‘grasp together’ all the spread-out events of our lives in order to tell coherent stories about them. *Mimesis*, in his opinion, is the dynamic operation of that storytelling we do. *Mythos*, meanwhile, is the content (the “what,” the plot) of *mimesis*.

In the simplest terms, we could say that Aristotle is inverting what Augustine does. Whereas Augustine tends to see discord (‘pulling-apart’) as emerging out of our attempts to produce coherence, Aristotle gives us a roadmap for imposing coherence (or order) on the disorderliness of temporal experience. Ultimately, though, Ricoeur will want to complicate this a bit by showing two things: (1) how our disconnected temporal experience does have some sort of coherence to it already; and (2) how our coherent narratives gain their coherence by including a sort of measured

disorderliness within themselves (e.g., a good story includes some surprising elements that break the causal chain of events and make things interesting).

Threefold Mimesis

After giving us his versions of Augustine and Aristotle, Ricoeur then tries to weave them together and so set up the rest of his project. His goal is to show that time and narrative have a *circular*—but productive—relationship. They mutually inform each other to such a degree that, in his estimation, the “*human*” experience of time is properly narrative in some way.

Ricoeur tries to show us that this circle of time and narrative isn’t vicious by walking us through the three kinds of mimesis. This is a division he himself is coming up with, and it seems to be related to the activity of ‘hermeneutical understanding’ which we already saw in his earlier essays. *Threefold mimesis* is a new way for him to share with us his vision of how the interpretation of texts connects the world of the author and the world of the reader in a dynamic way.

The “task of hermeneutics,” (53) he now says, is to reconstruct the operations of the three aspects of mimesis: (1) a text’s *prefiguration*, (2) its *composition*, and (3) its *refiguration*. A text is prefigured by the prior understanding of life and the world that informs its background. A text is also composed (“figured”) in a certain way, so that its elements are organized in ways that lead to new potential meanings. Finally, a text is refigured by its readers, who bring new meanings to life out of it and apply those meanings to their own lives and worlds.

[In this sense, the operation of mimesis should lead not just to an explanation of the text’s structural composition, but also to an *understanding*—a *fulfilled meaning*—of the text that brings it to bear upon experience. Think here of “What is a Text?”]

[We can also think of this “task of hermeneutics” as bookended by *phenomenology*: in Mimesis-1, there are pre-understandings of time, action, etc., which are active in our lived experience of the world, before any attempt to set those experiences down in text. And that *lived experience*, remember, is the business of phenomenology. In Mimesis-3, we also end up back at lived experience (and so phenomenology), because we have to bring the meaning of the narrative to bear on our own experiential world. But between these two phenomenological poles of experience, we have Mimesis-2 (the actual interpretation of the text in the narrow sense), which seemingly only *hermeneutics* can accomplish. So phenomenology and hermeneutics need each other here, too. Relate this back to “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics.”]

Some Questions:

1. Why do you think Ricoeur starts this fairly general work on time and narrative by talking about Augustine and Aristotle? What work does that do?
2. Does Ricoeur’s model of threefold mimesis replace his earlier descriptions of how we interpret and actualize texts in our own lives? (Think of his discussion of *understanding* texts, or bringing their meanings to *fulfillment*.) Or does it merely augment it? Or is it something entirely different?
3. Do we buy Ricoeur’s claim that the circularity between time and narrative is not vicious, but rather creative in some way? (By circularity, I mean this: we understand time as ‘narrate-able’ before we turn it into a narrative, but then it turns out that this pre-understanding of ours

has already been configured in advance by the narratives we've inherited from our traditions. In other words: how can we tell whether time really *demands* narration, or if it's just a historical accident that we tell narratives and then make the mistake of thinking that time is *inherently* narrative?)

Here's another simplistic grid:

	<i>Mimesis-1</i>	<i>Mimesis-2</i>	<i>Mimesis-3</i>
<i>Direction of Flow</i>	Experience → Text	Text, Text, Text...	Text → Experience
<i>Operation</i>	Prefiguration	Composition (or: 'figuration')	Refiguration
<i>Temporality</i>	Phenomenology or Experience of Time	The Time of the Work (its internal timeframe)	Experience of Time as influenced by Narrative
<i>Breakdown</i>	3 kinds of pre-understanding: (1) Having an idea of what action and plot are (2) Having an idea of potential symbols linked to actions (3) Having an idea of time as something that we can tell stories about	3 kinds of mediating between M1 & M2: (1) Random events turned into complete story (2) Discordance turned into concordance (3) Poetic resolution offered to the 'paradoxes' of temporal experience	4 observations: (1) Circle of Mimesis: time and narrative turn out to be intimately related (2) Reading stories actualizes them as meaningful in our own world (3) Communicating via narratives allows us to open up new kinds of reference and understanding, even new worlds (4) Our pre- understanding of time (cf. M-1) turns out to be conditioned by the narratives (M-2) we read (M-3) (5) Hence a circle or cycle: we couldn't tell narratives about our lives in time unless we already understood temporal life to be something that can be narrated; but we understand it in that way because of the narratives we receive...

